

OAMARU IN THE DEPRESSION

OF THE 1930s

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PREFACE

In Towards a New History? the Hocken lecture delivered in 1971, W.H. Oliver suggested that New Zealand historical writing would be strengthened by regional studies. Investigations at this level would place accepted generalisations under scrutiny. In particular, Oliver suggests that generalisations about New Zealand's depression are based on the experience of the major urban centres. This thesis examines the reaction of one region to the depression. All regions are, of course, to some extent unique and it would be dangerous to claim that Oamaru's experience is necessarily typical of New Zealand experience. Only when more studies have been completed of other regions, will Oamaru's experience be able to be fitted into a New Zealand pattern.

The choice of Oamaru as an area for study was based mainly on its size. It can be described as an intermediate-sized town which was what the thesis had set out to investigate. The years 1929 to 1935 were set as time limits to provide some guidelines for the thesis rather than as definitions of the depression years. For the most part, discussion of Oamaru centres on the town itself. It would, however, be impossible to deal with Oamaru outside of the whole North Otago region and therefore, the definition of Oamaru is elastic, stretching at times to include most of

the surrounding farming district and contracting at others to refer only to the area within the town boundaries.

Without the help and co-operation of many Oamaru people this thesis would not have been possible. Special thanks are due to the Oamaru Mail Company for the use of their holdings of the Oamaru Mail and the North Otago Times and also for the use of their facilities while research was undertaken. The Oamaru Borough Council was also extremely helpful and their co-operation in the search for records was deeply appreciated. Although many individuals helped in the gathering of material, special mention must be made of M. Smyth who offered the use of any historical records in his possession and from whose collection the majority of photographs in the thesis were taken. The local industries, Alliance Textile Limited and Waitaki-New Zealand Refrigerating Limited, were also extremely helpful in the provision of records and statistics. Thanks are also due to the Waitaki Hospital Board for the use of the records they held of the depression years. A debt of gratitude is also owed to the many people in Oamaru who consented to be interviewed about their depression experiences.

Special thanks are also due to my tutor Dr Len Richardson, for his advice and guidance and his many useful suggestions in the preparation of this thesis. The patience and help

of my husband, Chris Timms, also deserves special mention. His help in the checking and proof-reading was invaluable. A final thanks is due to my typist, Patricia Breen, for her ability to unravel my hand-writing and her speed under the pressure of time-limits.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents to whom so much is due that thanks are impossible.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<u>AJHR</u>	Appendix to the Journal of the House of Representatives
<u>NOT</u>	North Otago Times
<u>NZW</u>	New Zealand Worker
<u>OBC</u>	Oamaru Borough Council
<u>ODT</u>	Otago Daily Times
<u>OM</u>	Oamaru Mail
<u>PD</u>	Parliamentary Debates
<u>WCTU</u>	Women's Christian Temperance Union
<u>WEPB</u>	Waitaki Electric Power Board

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: OAMARU IN THE 1920s

Oamaru is beginning to realise its destiny to become a popular residential centre for those who are in comfortable circumstances and desire to spend their remaining years in ease and pleasant surroundings (1).

This was Oamaru in the 1920s. A quiet, placid retirement town for the "leisured classes" (2). Safe and snug from the 'evils' besetting the rest of New Zealand, Oamaru was, its leading citizens claimed, in no danger from the problems of economic fluctuations, unemployment and the rising crime rate. Oamaru's prosperity seemed assured. The town was experiencing a building boom, its few industries were prospering and the benefits likely to accrue to the town from the development of the hydro-electric power station some miles away augured well for the future. By 1929 little had occurred to alter this picture and Oamaru's wealth and growth were still much vaunted.

There were several reasons for the town's complacency in the 1920s and the dominant one was its geographic position. One of Oamaru's major claims to fame is that the town lies almost on the half-way mark between the equator and the South Pole (3). A fact which probably was not

(1) OM 21 Sept 1927.

(2) Ibid., 8 April 1929.

(3) The exact geographic position is $45^{\circ} 2'$ south latitude and $171^{\circ} 4'$ east longitude.

taken into account when the town was established. Developed primarily as a commercial centre to service the outlying farms in the North Otago Region, Oamaru is, as can be seen in Figure 1, the only major town in the area (4). This meant that it had no serious rivals for the local farmers' trade. None of the smaller settlements in the region showed any capacity to match Oamaru in population or commercial enterprise. Equally, there were no serious competitors immediately outside the North Otago Region. The two nearest cities, Timaru (50 miles north) and Dunedin (over 70 miles to the south) were too distant to be of any consequence for trade.

The impetus for growth of a town at Oamaru came, as it did for most of New Zealand, in the 1870s, during the 'boom' which followed Julius Vogel's immigration and public works programme. For a time Oamaru was characterised mainly by make-shift tents and houses as workers poured in. In the 1880s, however, the town's population growth began to wane and from 1891 to 1901 the position began gradually to improve (5). By the 1920s the population had stabilised at around 7,000 where it was to remain through the 1930s (6).

(4) North Otago is generally defined as lying between the Waitaki River and the Kakanui Mountains. It is sometimes known as the Waitaki Region.

(5) N.Z. Census 1891-1906 Population of Oamaru Borough:

1891	-	5,621	1896	-	5,225
1901	-	4,836	1906	-	5,071

(6) Ibid., 1926-1936

1926	-	7,003	1936	-	7,487
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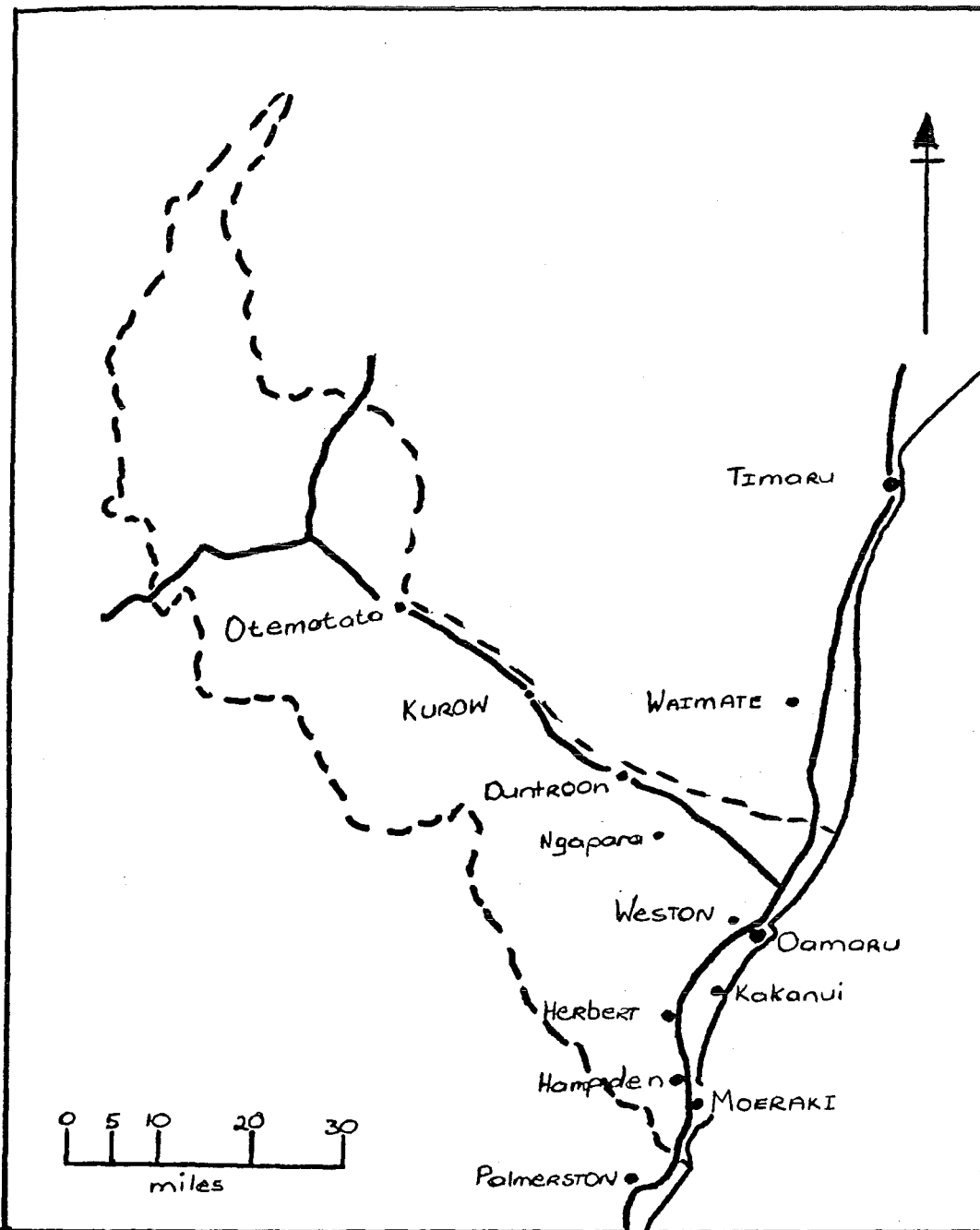
THE NORTH OTAGO REGION

Fig. 1

Another factor which contributed to Oamaru's attitudes in this decade, besides its geographic position, was its religious background. Like Dunedin, of which it was an off-shoot, Oamaru was greatly influenced by Presbyterianism. By the 1926 census those professing Presbyterian belief outnumbered Anglicans and Roman Catholics by two to one (7). This strong religious influence undoubtedly contributed to the emphasis that Oamaru's civic leaders came to lay on the principles of sobriety, thrift and industriousness. These three attributes were considered to hold the key to achieving success and prosperity.

A prevailing attitude was that Oamaru's prosperity was due, in large measure, to the abstinence of its citizens. Oamaru had adopted prohibition in 1906, partly as a consequence, it is claimed by the town's historian, of the drunkenness, immorality and crime which were rife in the town in the 1880s and 1890s (8). By the 1920s prohibition was an established fact of life. Drink was regarded not only as an extravagance, but also as a degrading evil which induced people to crime and precipitated the break up of family life. Oamaru prospered because its citizens resisted the temptation of the 'demon alcohol'. There were two groups associated with the propagation of the prohibition movement in the 1920s - the 'No Licence' Association and the

(7) Ibid., 1926 Religious Professions - Oamaru Borough
 Anglican 1,666
 Presbyterian 3,243
 Roman Catholic 848
 (8) McDonald, K.C. White Stone Country pp. 201, 224.

Women's Christian Temperance Union. The former was dominated by Presbyterian and Anglican churchmen and while it met regularly, was most active each election year. For its part the Women's Christian Temperance Union was rather less active and much of its energies were spent in prayer or in fund-raising activities. Support for prohibition in Oamaru came for a variety of reasons. Some businessmen, for example, felt that the 'no-licence' situation attracted people and trade to the town. The sober, law-abiding image which the town now projected, held more appeal for commercial interests than the drunken, brawling town of the 1890s. The majority of citizens appeared to have had an apathetic attitude to the question. They supported the principle of prohibition for Oamaru but had no desire for active participation in the temperance crusade. This is obvious from the efforts of the Temperance Union to have the White Ribbon paper placed in the reading room of the Public Library (9). The Library had always included a White Ribbon paper in the subscriber's room. However, the Temperance Union had always considered that this did not reach enough people. They began a campaign, therefore, to have the paper moved to the reading room where it would be more readily available. The Union achieved its objectives "after much difficulty" (10) and a 16 month campaign.

(9) The White Ribbon paper was a form of pledge against the evils of alcohol.

(10) WCTU Minute Book 7 July 1930.

This reluctance to make the paper available to the general public indicates the general lack of interest in the moralistic propagation of the temperance movement.

Equally, for those who actively supported the consumption of alcohol, living in Oamaru was no great hardship. There were two very well patronised hotels outside the town boundary, at Glenavy and Georgetown, and for those less inclined to travel there was the attraction of home-brewing (11). Although offenders appeared in Court from time to time on charges of 'home-brewing' or 'sly grogging' the practice continued, but the charges were infrequent and therefore no real deterrent. Also, all the ingredients for the concoction of home-brews were readily available in the Oamaru stores.

There were those, however, who felt that Oamaru's development had been retarded as a result of prohibition. Those who favoured a return of hotel licences often alleged as part of their argument that the liquor laws deterred people from settling in Oamaru and as a consequence industrial growth was retarded. The Oamaru Mail was always one of the leading opponents of this view and it continually stressed the benefits gained by the town as a result of abstinence (12). The newspaper was always quick

(11) See Ch. 2 p. 49

(12) OM 1 July 1931.

to defend the principle of sobriety and in fact led the prohibition cause throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

The Oamaru Mail also extolled the thriftiness and industriousness of the citizens of Oamaru, as an added reason for Oamaru's prosperity. No opportunity to demonstrate how much these virtues were part of the character of Oamaru's citizens was ever lost. Thus, the newspaper proudly noted in 1928 that the quarterly returns from the Post Office Savings Banks demonstrated that Oamaru was one of four towns in New Zealand where deposits exceeded withdrawals (13). Statements from local retailers and travellers were used on occasions to highlight this thriftiness. Comments by commercial travellers that, "Oamaru was the best town they had done business in for cash as against time payments", were paraded as evidence of the town's industry, prosperity and virtuousness (14).

The general affluence the town was experiencing is expressed negatively also in the bankruptcy figures for the decade. This becomes especially obvious when the figures are compared with those of Greymouth and Whangarei (

(13) Ibid., 3 Feb 1928.

(14) Ibid.,

(15)	<u>N.Z. Statistics</u>	<u>Miscellaneous</u>	<u>Bankruptcies</u>	<u>1925-1930</u>
	Oamaru	Greymouth	Whangarei	
	1925	5	10	13
	1926	5	6	8
	1927	5	8	26
	1928	6	6	23
	1929	4	6	13

These two towns were of comparable size to Oamaru and the figures for Whangarei, in particular, were much higher (16). The relatively high figure for Whangarei might well indicate simply the difficulties dairy farmers were experiencing in the 1920s.

The discussion to this point has in the main assumed, however, that Oamaru's citizens always acted as one concerted group. This was far from so. Oamaru was subject to the social and economic tensions which are characteristic of most New Zealand towns. The chief determinants of social status, in Oamaru as elsewhere, were occupation, residential area and income. Income rates last, since the type of job was more important than yearly earnings. A freezing worker, no matter how large his income, would have had little prestige in Oamaru society. Respectable occupations with a great deal of prestige attached to them included farming, medicine, the law or business. Moreover, there was social status attached to certain residential areas in Oamaru. Living on 'the South Hill' (17) was socially advantageous. Living on the flat, especially in the northern part of town close to the railway station or the woollen mills made one socially less acceptable. The industrial workers lived to the north,

(16) N.Z. Census 1926 Population
 Greymouth 5,628
 Whangarei 6,343
 (17) See map - Appendix 1, p. 173.

the 'respectable people' on the South Hill. A look at two streets of Oamaru highlights this. The occupations are vastly different. Greta Street on the South Hill has a much higher percentage of people in prestigious professions, whereas Foyle Street, on the flat to the north of the town, has a far higher proportion of its residents in manual occupations (18). This social distinction in Oamaru is aptly described in Janet Frame's novel, Owls Do Cry:

Francie Withers is dirty. Francie Withers is poor. The Withers haven't a weekend bach nor do they live on the South Hill nor have they got a vacuum cleaner nor do they learn dancing or the piano nor have birthday parties nor their photos taken at the Dainty Studio to be put in the window on a Friday (19).

The novel portrays Oamaru's respectable citizens as quite contemptuous of those who had not 'made the grade' (20). This was also another legacy of the town's Presbyterian background which meant that hard work and success were the

-
- (18) Wise's Street Directory 1929 Occupations of Residents
 Greta Street (2 blocks only) Foyle Street
- | | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|----------|
| 2 Builders | 1 Teacher | 1 Secretary | 1 Fitter |
| 2 Clerks | 1 Stock Agent | 1 Foreman | 1 Baker |
| 2 Accountants | 1 Factory Owner | 3 Carpenters | 1 Driver |
| 4 Salesmen | 1 Saddler | 1 Fisherman | |
| 2 Managers | 1 Insurance Agent | 1 Storeman | |
| 1 Engine Driver | 1 Company Director | 3 Labourers | |
| 2 Labourers | 1 Shop Assistant | 1 Bus Proprietor | |
| 1 Draper | 1 Machinist | 1 Manager | |
| 1 Bookseller | 1 Lime Foreman | 1 Engineer | |
- (19) Frame, J. Owls Do Cry p.26
- (20) The town is called Waimaru in the novel, however, its geographic location, street names and industries make it clear that it is about Oamaru.

socially accepted ideals. There was no place in Oamaru society for those who could not live up to this ideal. Success, as already indicated, was measured by occupation, residence and income.

The attitudes and aims of Oamaruvians appear almost to be in complete harmony throughout the 1920s. This is of course, not a full picture, but there was one principal reason for the illusion. This was the dominance of Oamaru's local bodies by men of similar income, occupation and residence. The dominant occupation represented on the Oamaru Borough Council and other local bodies was that of small businessmen. In 1925, for example, 10 of the 13 members of the council belonged to the category of small business proprietors (21). Not only did this group dominate the council, but usually the same men filled local body committees. It was common for one individual councillor to be a member of two or three local bodies.

In many ways public life in Oamaru was the preserve of a small business elite. The members of this elite had similar backgrounds. Some had retired to the town from farms in the district. Others were owners, former owners or managers of local businesses. Practically all were self employed. Most were Presbyterian, a fact

(21) Faidd, P. 'North Otago: The Electors and the Elect', M.A. Thesis, CU 1967, p. 10.

which reflects the local dominance of this religion. Nearly all lived on the South Hill, a further sign of their respectability. Success had confirmed their belief that material progress was the product of hard work and sobriety. This entrenched attitude made it difficult for Oamaru's leading citizens to accept that the growing unemployment of the 1920s was due to anything other than lack of individual initiative and effort. As prosperous, successful people, Oamaru's local notables saw no reason why others should not show the initiative they themselves claimed to have demonstrated. In practical terms, their advice to younger men was 'to get on the land'. The lesson of the 1920s, however, was unmistakeable - cheap entry onto the land was simply no longer possible. The dominance of these men with so many attitudes in common in the community made for a continuity of aims in municipal affairs throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Central to Oamaru's development in these decades was the tacit or explicit acceptance of the idea that Oamaru should be a retirement town for the 'leisured classes'. This assumption limited the options open to local commercial or business interests. Oamaru's prosperity must be maintained and furthered, but not at the expense of the town's image as a quiet and peaceful retirement centre. Such an attitude left little room for industrial development. In fact, most citizens would have shied away from any development which would alter Oamaru's charms. The investment patterns of the town's

wealthier citizens demonstrates this. Most had financial interests outside of Oamaru in which they invested any profits they made in the town. There was in the late 1920s a Malay Rubber Company which had its head office in Oamaru. Many wealthier citizens had money invested in this. One of these was R. Milligan, a local flour mill owner and financier who also became chairman of the company in 1931 (22). In 1927 the Malay Company made quite a substantial profit and was able to pay two 10 percent dividends. Although the company continued in existence until the 1940s, it too became a victim of the depressed economy of the 1930s and no more dividends were paid. Ventures such as this absorbed most loose capital abroad in Oamaru in the 1920s and although some preferred a safer form for their investments, such as insurance companies, it was always to areas outside of Oamaru that they looked. This naturally limited the possibility of locally financed industrial development.

This preference for investing money outside of Oamaru may seem somewhat at odds with the previously expressed wish of ensuring Oamaru's prosperity, but it is merely another facet of the town's self-image. Prosperity was to

(22) R. Milligan was also involved in many local body organisations. He served on the Borough Council, the Waitaki Electric Power Board and the Harbour Board during the 1920s and 1930s, and in 1927 he presented to Oamaru the 'Wonderland' statuary in the Public Gardens.

be encouraged but only where this could be done without disturbing Oamaru's other characteristics of peace and leisureliness. Most citizens saw Oamaru's role as continuing as the service centre for the region. They had no wish for, and saw no need for industrial development. Oamaru was progressing as the North Otago region was progressing, since the economy of the two was inextricably linked. Oamaru's economy cannot be looked at separately from that of the whole region.

The economy of the North Otago region has five major bases (23). The first and most important of these is the farming industry, principally sheep, followed by grain, field crops, livestock and poultry. The second component of the economy is manufacturing; the freezing works and other Oamaru industries. Following this there is building construction and then the services which are provided for people normally living outside North Otago, that is tourists or boarders at the local schools. Finally there is hydro-electric power generation. This ranks third in the economy today but in the 1920s and 1930s it was but a minor developing industry.

The farming industry was the most important, not only for the whole region, but also specifically for Oamaru. Essentially a market town, Oamaru's industries were of secondary importance in the economic sphere. Moreover,

(23) Hearn, T.J., & Slater, F.A., (eds) North Otago Region And Development. p. 74

local industry was dependent on locally farmed products and was therefore as dependent on the farming community as the trading community.

The three major industries in Oamaru: the flour mills, the woollen mills and the freezing works, are all obviously based on local produce. There were four flour mills in and around Oamaru by the 1920s and all were relatively prosperous (24). The fact that all four are still in existence is some indication of their sound position. All of the mills were, however, relatively small concerns. In 1926, 8,162 tons of flour were shipped out of the Oamaru port and in 1927, 9,052 tons were exported (25). Since this would represent the flour from all four mills it is obvious that the individual mills were not very large.

The woollen mills which had been established by local businessmen in 1883 was a thriving concern by the 1920s, although by this time the majority of shares had passed to an Auckland company, Mackay, Logan and Caldwell. At no stage up to the late 1920s had the company failed to pay a dividend to its shareholders. Although a large amount of the company's work was devoted to individual

(24) The four flour mills were: Meeks (Oamaru), Irelands (Oamaru), Clarks (Maheno), and Milligans (Ngapara).

(25) OM 5 Jan 1928.

orders, it was also involved in blanket-making, hosiery yarns and increasingly in the 1920s, in manufacturing knitting yarns.

The other major industry, the freezing works, had been established in 1913 by the New Zealand Refrigerating Company. In 1922 it was taken over by a group of local farmers and businessmen and was renamed the Waitaki Farmers' Freezing Company, but was known locally as the Pukeuri works. Throughout the 1920s the new company failed to pay a dividend to shareholders. So insecurely based was the venture that on one occasion there was no money available to pay the staff (26). Despite these financial problems, production figures rose considerably throughout the 1920s (27).

Another industry which had been important to Oamaru was that of stone-quarrying. The limestone from which Oamaru derives its name, 'White Stone City', was at one stage among the town's more important assets. The stone had a two-fold use - as a building stone and also as crushed lime fertiliser for farms. At one stage some

(26) This incident occurred during the winter months and thus only affected the administrative staff.

(27) McDonald, C.R., 'History of Waitaki Industries.'

Major production items - sheep and lambs:

1923	192,740	1927	258,596
1924	137,024	1928	294,676
1925	213,405	1929	279,304
1926	143,567		

(Unpublished company history).

of the limestone was exported. However, this avenue was closing down in the 1920s. It looked for a while as though the export trade was to be revived in 1929 when a contract to supply stone to Melbourne was gained by the Gay Stone Company. This was the first shipment to Melbourne for 30 years and was made up 400 tons of limestone (28). However, despite hopes to the contrary, this remained the only such shipment. Oamaru stone continued in use mainly in buildings in Oamaru and elsewhere in New Zealand. The amount of stone shipped out of Oamaru fluctuated in the 1920s, but it was a slowly dying trade.

By the 1920s building had become a very important local industry. The town was in the throes of a building boom. Most of the new buildings were private buildings, especially homes, rather than business dwellings (29). This is perhaps another sign of the town's prosperity and its function as a retirement centre. Retired farmers had the money to spend on new or better homes.

(28) NOT 16 July 1929.

(29) N.Z. Statistics of Population and Building 1925-1930
Buildings in Oamaru 1925-1930:

	<u>Private</u>	<u>Business</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>Total</u>
1925-1926	31	5	-	36
1926-1927	62	4	1	67
1927-1928	52	4	1	57
1928-1929	34	2	1	37
1929-1930	31	6	-	37

Another source of revenue for Oamaru and North Otago generally was from the services it provided to others. The 1920s witnessed a substantial growth in the boarding establishments at local schools. Both Waitaki Boys' High School and its sister school, Waitaki Girls' High School, had by this time achieved nation-wide reputations. Beside these, there were two private schools, both catering for boarders; Teschemakers, a college for girls which was established some 10 miles outside the town, and St Thomas's School for boys. In 1927 there was another secondary school for boys established - St Kevin's College on the Redcastle estate. All the schools catered for pupils from all over the Dominion and most concentrated on their boarding establishments rather than on the local 'day' pupils.

Most coastal towns hope for the development of their port, and Oamaru was no exception. The local business community was especially anxious to encourage regular direct shipments to Oamaru from England. The arrival of such a ship, the Rimutaka in 1929, was enthusiastically greeted by the community as a whole. More goods through the port would mean more money for Oamaru generally. Direct shipments from England were arranged by local businessmen

who banded together to place the necessary orders to fill the ship and also to ensure outward cargo (30). It was hoped that the projected 'hydro works' at Kurow some 40 miles from Oamaru, would add to the volume of trade through the port. When it became obvious that the government preferred to ship goods for construction work at Kurow to Dunedin or Timaru, there was an immediate outcry from the community (31). In 1930, the Waterside Workers' Union added their voice to the call for more shipping of hydro material through Oamaru. The Union also criticised the Meat Producers' Board for allocating ships which were not suitable for the Oamaru port to collect the meat, thus compelling the Waitaki Freezing Works to ship its produce through another port (32). Despite these complaints, however, the port of Oamaru grew only marginally through the period. The numbers of ships visiting Oamaru did rise, but not very significantly (33).

(30) OM 5 April 1929.

(31) See Ch. 5, p. 121.

(32) OM 3 Sept 1930.

(33) Marshall, P.A. 'The Port of Oamaru', M.A. Thesis, CU 1940, Appendix. Table of Shipping:

	No. Coastal	No. Overseas	Total
1928	145	24	169
1929	144	19	163
1930	135	31	166
1931	150	31	181
1932	143	37	180
1933	163	23	186
1934	195	8	203
1935	174	13	187

Thus just as Oamaru was always anxious to foster any project which might enhance the town's prestige and wealth, it was always equally anxious to speak out against any scheme which might detract from this. An example of this parochial loyalty occurred during discussions over changes in the regional boundaries, in 1930. In that year, the G.W. Forbes Government proposed that the area between the Waitaki and Waiho Rivers, formerly classified as part of the Oamaru district, become part of Timaru (34). This aroused an immediate protest. All Oamaru local bodies banded together to lodge their objections. It was not just local prestige at stake, it was also local finance. A great number of products, especially grain, were shipped through the local port and it was feared that this trade would be lost. Despite government assurances that such products would continue to go through Oamaru such fears were not quieted. A conference of local bodies despatched a deputation to Wellington, but without success as the area became part of the Timaru region (35).

Farming and its associated industries, building and, to a limited extent, the Oamaru port, were chief components of the local economy. Oamaru's prosperity was based on its close relationship with the local farming community.

(34) OBC Minute Book, 3, 17 July 1930.

(35) OM 17 Dec 1930.

Its own industry, despite some growth, remained of lesser importance. To begin with the industries were not labour intensive. One important consequence of this was that trade unions and industrial workers played a small part in the Oamaru scene. The aspirations and problems of this group were foreign to civic leaders, and no unionist or wage earner was represented on any of the local bodies. Trade unions in Oamaru were few in number and in members. In the 1920s there were only eight unions with registered branches in Oamaru (36). There were unions, naturally, with members in the district which did not have registered branches in Oamaru. It remains true, however, that industrial labour in Oamaru was not well organised. There was a North Otago Labour Council in existence in the 1920s, but this body seems to have been more involved with the Labour party than with trade union organisation. Certainly there was no body which combined any or all of the unions in existence. None of the unions in Oamaru were particularly effective organisations. The most important union was the freezing workers' union. However even among freezing workers, unionism had only a weak hold, indeed the union at Pukeuri was company controlled. Because of this, any delegates selected by the men were largely ineffective (37).

(36) See Appendix II p.174.

(37) An interesting incident demonstrating this ineffectiveness allegedly occurred when the union delegate protested about the manager's actions. He pointed out that the men were protected by the union award. At this the manager asked where it was in the award and then proceeded to strike out the clause. Whether or not the incident did occur it does demonstrate the feelings of unionists. They knew their position was hopeless.

Thus unionism was only a minor factor in the Oamaru scene. This situation seemed unlikely to alter as during the 1920s Oamaru's population scarcely grew. Since Oamaru was unwilling to encourage industrial growth, it attracted seasonal workers hoping to find employment at the freezing works, but few workers who became permanent residents. The annual influx of migratory workers did not unduly disturb the town's peace and quiet. For the most part itinerant freezing workers lived in lodgings provided at the works. They brought more money into the town, but any problems which they might have caused remained largely outside the town.

Thus by the end of the 1920s, Oamaru was still conforming to its image as a haven of peace and prosperity. The leading citizens were engaged in furthering this aim. Even Oamaru, however, was beginning to feel the effects of changes taking place elsewhere in New Zealand. Although many hoped that Oamaru's prosperity would remain secure in the face of the impending economic troubles, by late 1928 it was becoming obvious that this would prove difficult, if not impossible.

CHAPTER TWOUNEMPLOYMENT AND OAMARU'S ATTEMPTS TO COPE

The downturn in the New Zealand economy generally was reflected in Oamaru after 1928. From then it became increasingly obvious that the town's prosperity was declining. Since the economy of the North Otago region was based around the local farming community, the slump in farmer's incomes in the late 1920s affected the whole area. This was reflected in Oamaru in three main ways; a decline in trade and manufacturing, higher bankruptcy levels and most importantly, a high rate of unemployment.

The effects of the lower prices which farmers were receiving for their produce became apparent in Oamaru by 1929 when the decline in the volume of trade became more marked (1). Of even more concern to the Oamaru community was the rapid decline, after 1928, of the building trade. This industry was among the first to feel the effects of the slump. The early unemployment figures were dominated by carpenters and tradesmen from industries related to building, such as, stonemasons and painters (2). The sudden fall in the number of buildings

(1) NOT 14 Nov 1929.

(2) Ibid., 22 May, 3, 15 June 1929.

is startling proof of the demise of the town's prosperity (3). Fewer people now had the money to splurge on a home of their own and thus one assumes that more people were renting houses. More evidence of the town's fall in affluence is given by the rise in the number of bankruptcies at the beginning of the 1930s, however, these quickly fell back to a level below that of the 1920s (4). The levels in the business trade and in the building industry, however, did not show a similar improvement. The level of building carried out in the town remained low until after 1936. While for businesses and stores generally, there was no suggestion of improvement until late 1934-1935 (5). The low volume of trade meant that no new staff or developments were undertaken by most firms. There were no notable businesses in the town, however, which folded as a result of the depression.

(3) N.Z. Statistics of Population and Building 1930-1935.
Oamaru, Building Permits:

	<u>Private</u>	<u>Business</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>Total</u>
1930-1931	17	4	-	21
1931-1932	4	-	-	4
1932-1933	10	-	-	10
1933-1934	13	-	-	13
1934-1935	10	-	-	10

(4) N.Z. Statistics - Miscellaneous 1929-1935.
Oamaru Bankruptcies:

1929	-	4	1933	-	1
1930	-	8	1934	-	2
1931	-	9	1935	-	2
1932	-	1			

OM 24 Dec 1934; 2 Feb, 31 Dec 1935.

The three major local industries appeared to cope reasonably well with the depressed conditions. No great steps forward were made, but the industries still came nowhere near failing. In the case of Waitaki Farmers' Freezing Company, its position became assured during the early 1930s. Like most other freezing works in New Zealand, the Waitaki Company introduced the chain system of killing which increased output. The company was paying off its debt to the New Zealand Refrigerating Company throughout the period, however it did manage to pay its first dividend, of five percent, to shareholders in 1935 (6). The Pukeuri Works showed a slight profit all through the depression years despite the losses being experienced in other works.

For the Oamaru Woollen Mills the early 1930s were also relatively prosperous. The company was involved in complicated takeover manoeuvres in the early 1930s, which resulted in an eventual change of ownership and name in 1935. It was henceforth to be known as The Oamaru Worsted and Woollen Mills Ltd. Despite this change the company had shown a profit for every year in the period 1930-1935. Although the sales declined, the price of raw material declined also and hence the company was able to prosper (7).

(6) McDonald, C.R. op cit. p.39.

(7) McDonald, K.C. 'Oamaru Woollen Mills' (unpublished company record) p.103.

For the local flour mills the position was much the same. All retained their pre-depression prosperity, although they too were unable to make any progressive moves. The decline in sales for them was also matched by the lower price they paid for their raw materials.

Oamaru's other 'industry', that of boarders at the local schools suffered greatly during the depression. At Waitaki Boys' High School, for instance, the number of boarders was almost halved (8). This was mainly a result of local farmers deciding to remove their children from the boarding establishments in order to cut costs. In some cases they removed the children permanently while in others they merely continued to send them to school as 'day' pupils.

The most prominent indicator of the arrival of the depression in Oamaru lay in the sudden escalation in the unemployment figures. Undoubtedly these were a result of the overall decline in prosperity in the town. Although most areas of trade and manufacturing continued to prosper they were unable to expand or progress to any

(8)	McDonald, K.C.	<u>A History of Waitaki Boys' High School</u>	
	1883-1958.		
	Year	Total Pupils	Boarders
	1929	507	186
	1930	498	158
	1931	526	153
	1932	482	118
	1933	423	94
	1934	431	96
	1935	447	123

great extent. Oamaru had been accustomed through the 1920s to coping with unemployment figures of about seven men in the winter months and falling away to almost nothing in the summer months. The graphs below show just how dramatically unemployment escalated in Oamaru from 1929 onwards. These new figures seemed almost catastrophic. By late 1930, unemployment had reached about 100. In 1931 they increased rapidly, peaking at close on 550 by late that year. The position became worse still in 1932, however, when the numbers of registered unemployed climbed to over 650 men. This meant that one in every 12 people in Oamaru was officially unemployed. From the beginning of 1933 the situation began to show some improvement. The figures began to fall to around 300 or 400 where they remained, reaching over 500 again only in late 1935. There is one major reason for this. Unemployment itself does not seem to have lessened at all in Oamaru. Instead the Unemployment Committee was forced, by financial circumstances, to apply more stringent conditions to those allowed to register as unemployed (9). This meant that a large number of unemployed were removed from the official lists.

(9) See below p. 50.

UNEMPLOYMENT LEVELS 1930-1935

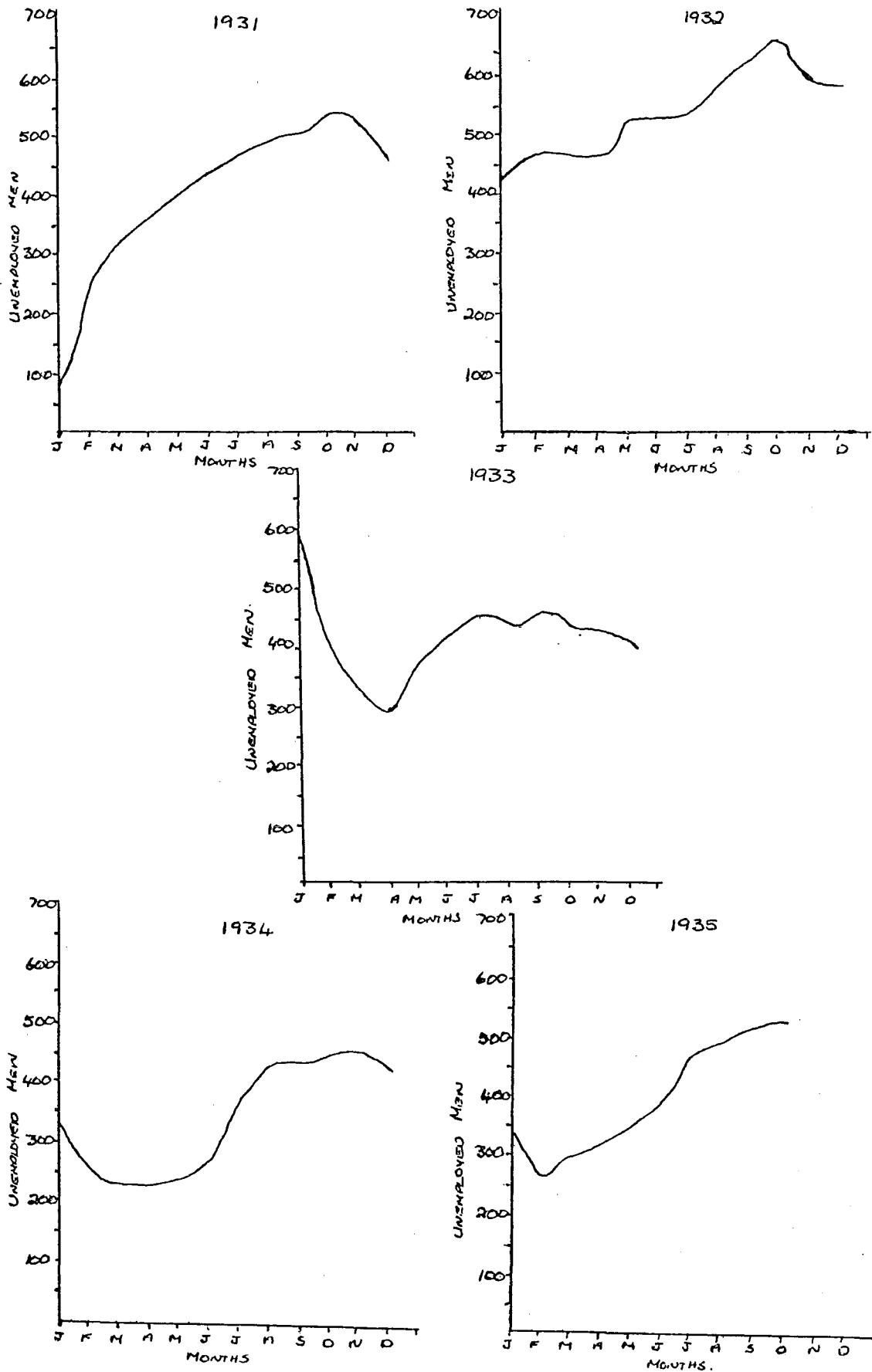


Fig. 2 OM 1930-1935 Unemployment Figures.

Thus Oamaru, which had experienced relatively little unemployment, was confronted with a dramatically changed situation. This community where individual effort was constantly vaunted, where success was prized and those who did not succeed were despised, was presented with wholesale failure. For the prosperous Oamaru community of the 1920s, unemployment was the result of personal failure and laziness and it was the duty of the individual to keep himself in work. Whether or not Oamaru would be able to relieve its massive unemployment levels would depend on the community's ability to reconsider its values.

Faced with rising unemployment in 1928, most Oamaruvians, like New Zealanders generally, regarded the problem as one to be dealt with at the family level. The relatively small number of jobless in and around Oamaru up to 1929 received little in the way of public assistance. Employers, whether public or private, were urged however to keep men in work. In June 1928, an Oamaru Mail editorial roundly criticised the Oamaru Borough Council for discharging men and thereby contributing to local unemployment (10). Self employed tradesmen dependent upon council contracts for a substantial part of their income were among the first to take steps to protect themselves. They formed a federation embracing all tradesmen - the North Otago Sub-contractors

(10) OM 23 June 1928.

Association. The sub-contractors explained that such a body was now necessary as a "consequence of a number of unpleasant experiences " (11).

The growing recognition that Oamaru's insulation from nation-wide economic ills was at an end, awakened the realisation that measures would have to be adopted to reduce unemployment. There were still hopes for an early solution to the Dominion's problems and so all local relief schemes were considered as stop-gap measures. In the absence of any national scheme to aid the jobless, local business organisations made attempts to provide them with temporary employment. But an essentially rural service town was limited in what it could offer. The major industries, the woollen mills, freezing works and flour mills, could absorb few men. Instead, it was the local body organisations and community groups which bore the brunt of the problem.

The main local body concerned with finding work for the jobless was the Oamaru Borough Council. It alone had the necessary resources and finance. In July 1928, the council examined the question of unemployment and launched a variety of schemes, which aimed to provide employment. The work provided was mainly tree-planting and street maintenance. It was available only to married

(11) Ibid., 26 July 1928.

men who were resident in Oamaru, or within two miles of the town's boundaries before 1 June, 1928 (12). One of its most useful projects commenced was the upgrading of the Severn Street terraces which began in mid-January, 1929. The council planned to upgrade the slopes along the eastern side of Severn Street by strengthening the banks and forming stone terraces to make this, the main road into Oamaru from the south, more attractive. The council voted to pay men on the scheme award rates, though their apparently humane decision may well have been influenced by the rather narrow margin between award rates and relief rates (13).

By July 1929 the upgrading of the banks had been completed and the major work, that of building the terraces, was started. But the venture soon ran into problems. The council was divided as to whether or not the project should be continued as relief work. Some members felt that the work should be carried out by qualified tradesmen rather than by unemployed men. This view coincided with that of the Master Mason's Association which naturally wanted the council to employ its members on the normal contract system. However, as one member of the council pointed out, there were a number of tradesmen among the

(12) OBC Minute Book 12, 5 July 1928.

(13) Ibid., 18 Jan 1929.

unemployed and eventually, it was decided to continue to use the work to absorb the unemployed (14).

By the end of July 1929 preliminary work had begun and it was completed by December. However, the Severn Street terraces proved to be a controversial piece of relief work in another respect. In August 1929, a councillor, J. McDiarmid, a former Mayor, complained to the Oamaru Mail that machine-cut stone was being used in building the terraces. More work could be provided, he argued, if hand-cut stone was used. Moreover he calculated that hand-cut stone would also cost less. This, he said had been the council's original intention, but its wishes were ignored by the sub-committee administering the work. He also alleged that the stone being used was coming from Gay's stone quarry with which a sitting councillor, E.A. Fox, had connections. Since Fox was also on the committee organising the terrace work, and therefore involved in the purchase of the stone, McDiarmid felt that the councillor should have declared his interest. This latter allegation caused quite a furore and led to investigations by the Audit Department which substantiated McDiarmid's claims. Legal proceedings against Fox began in December 1929. On 12 February, 1930 he was found guilty and thereby lost his seat on the council. Thus

(14) Ibid., 4 July 1929.

the terraces had resounding consequences apart from their immediate function as a relief work (15).

As well as the work done on the Severn Street terraces, the council employed jobless men on other projects. Men were occupied on work in the Public Gardens and in tree-planting projects. These works were often carried out in conjunction with other local groups such as the R.S.A. and the Oamaru Beautifying Society. The R.S.A. subsidised the employment of ex-servicemen on council projects (16). In September 1929, for example, 24 returned soldiers were given work by the council; flower-planting in the Public Gardens, tree-planting along Hospital Road, and at the Reservoir Reserve on the outskirts of the town (17). These subsidies by the R.S.A. continued throughout the depression and were the main form of relief undertaken by that body for its members (18).

The Oamaru Beautifying Society, for its part, consistently submitted plans for relief work to the council. Many of the schemes were rejected because they conflicted with or duplicated the council's own plans or because they were impractical. The society's plans for tree and shrub-planting

(15) OM 6-9 Aug 1929; 5, 18, 20 Dec 1929; 12 Feb 1930.

(16) OBC Minute Book 2 Aug 1928.

(17) OM 30 Sept 1929.

(18) See for example, OBC Minute Book, 6 Oct 1932.

around Oamaru and other beautifying works, were however, adopted and provided useful work for the jobless (19). In January 1929, 10 men were employed by the society to tidy up Thames Street, Oamaru's main thoroughfare. As in all the society's relief ventures, the work was rotated among the unemployed, so that while the number of men employed by the society at any one time remained small, the total number helped by the society was considerable. By December 1930 unemployed men had earned £138.12s working on the society's projects (20).

Another local organisation involved in much of the early relief work was the Friendly Bay Improvement Society. The society's initial relief project was the building of tennis courts along the shoreline. Aided by a government subsidy, the courts were completed before Christmas 1929 (21).

In July 1929, another project was mooted which was immediately hailed as a valuable piece of work to undertake. This was the idea of forming a track around Cape Wanbrow to Bushy Beach. This track, which was to be known as Marine Parade, would give pedestrians access to Bushy Beach. Formerly the only access was around the top of the Cape. The Oamaru Mail heartily endorsed the scheme and the project received a grant of £200 from the government. Local funds for the scheme came from a 'badge day' which raised a total

(19) Ibid., 28 Aug 1930.

(20) OM 5 Dec 1930.

(21) OM 20 Dec 1929.

of £86.10.3d (22). The first sod of the new track was turned by the then mayor, F. Crawshaw, in September. The venture provided work for men throughout the depression. In August 1931, for example, there were 12 men employed by the Marine Parade Society on widening the track. About a year later the number was down to seven men (23). There was always only a small number of men at work on the track at any one time and this coupled with the difficulties involved in carving steps out of rock and clay on a sheer cliff-face, accounts for the delay in completion (24).

Community projects financed partly by the government and partly by local contribution, were then the mainstay of Oamaru's early attempts to aid its unemployed. By mid-1929 it was becoming an inescapable fact that these piecemeal efforts, however valuable, were not enough. The burden of relief would have to be shared by the whole community. New and better organisation was required. In June 1929, the mayor, F. Crawshaw, summoned a meeting of representatives of local bodies to discuss the problem (25). The outcome was the formation of a Citizen's Committee which was directed to seek ways of helping local unemployed. Those present considered that the situation was nowhere near

(22) OBC Municipal History of Oamaru. p.70

(23) OM 31 Aug 1931; 22 Aug 1932.

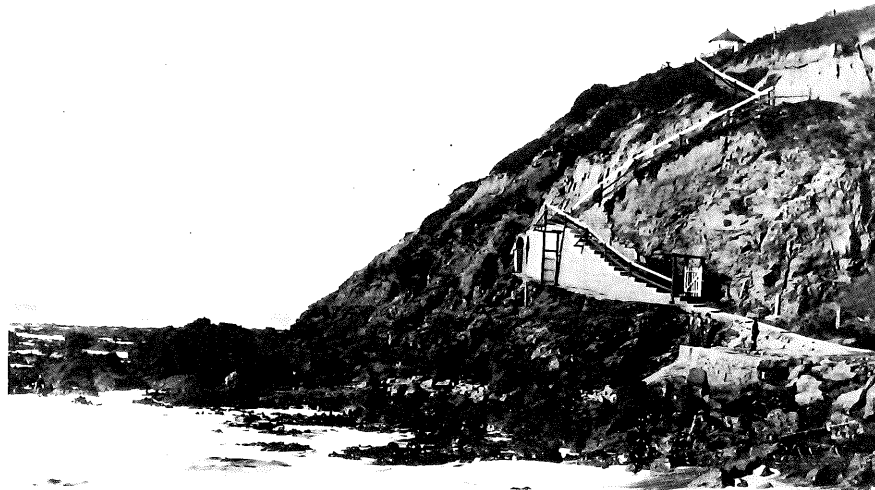
(24) In 1935 a memorial specifically commemorating the work of W.G. Graves, a local lawyer, in establishing the track was laid at the entrance and thereafter it was officially known as the Grave Memorial Track.

(25) OM 15 June 1929.

Fig. 3



The first day on the Marine Parade track 1929.



Actual work in progress on the track.



The turning of the first sod by the mayor, F. Crawshaw, September 10 1929.
(M. Smyth, Historical Collection)

as critical in Oamaru as elsewhere. Nevertheless, they felt it better to take action before unemployment grew to an unmanageable figure. To help finance such schemes as the committee might launch, a Mayor's Fund was established (26). Oamaru resorted to the traditional fund-raiser - a Sunday concert to open the fund. The Oamaru Mail tried to encourage contributions by publishing lists of donors, but with diminishing success (27). Beyond the establishment of the Mayor's Fund, the Citizen's Committee achieved little. Indeed, the committee soon became moribund and, far from launching any new schemes, merely continued to contribute to those already in operation.

The provision of work was naturally the most positive way of avoiding poverty, but Oamaru also took steps to alleviate distress in cases where employment was not readily available. At this time in New Zealand, help for those in need was dispensed through the Charitable Aid Boards. The Waitaki Hospital and Charitable Aid Board fulfilled this function in Oamaru. It was concerned mainly with assisting those in acute distress. The Board dispensed clothing and money and through Victoria Home, which was primarily a home for the aged, frequently provided shelter for homeless transients. The Board, however, like most others in New

(26) Ibid.

(27) The appeal lasted for over two-months and raised £1,000. However, in 1931, Oamaru was able to raise £3,000 in under two weeks for Napier earthquake victims.

Zealand, had neither the facilities nor the finances to cope with the pressures of distress caused by unemployment. Indeed, in September 1929, the Board had to appeal for old clothing as its supply was being quickly depleted (28). In August 1929, there were only four applications from women for relief - of these two were granted (29). But in the following month the Board stated that a "very large number" sought relief but no figures were given (30). Thereafter, the numbers seeking relief from the Board remained steady at between three to eight each month (31). These numbers, however, do not give an accurate picture of local distress. One important factor was that other organisations grew up which replaced much of the Board's activities. The Women's Relief Committee, for example, provided clothing, meat and groceries to those in need and thus largely superseded the Charitable Aid Board as a local dispenser of relief. Indeed, the committee had been established in 1931, precisely because the Board had not the resources to cope (32). Its very appearance is proof of the relative failure of charitable aid organisation in Oamaru. This is not to say that money expended by the Board on relief did

(28) OM 17 Sept 1929.

(29) Waitaki Hospital and Charitable Aid Board, Minute Book, 16 Aug 1929.

(30) Ibid., 13 Sept 1929.

(31) Ibid., 1929-1935.

(32) OM 18 June 1932.

not rise during the period, but that it did not do so as dramatically as might have been expected (33).

Churches also played an important role in alleviating distress. The absence of any written record makes it difficult to calculate the extent of assistance they offered. Oral evidence suggests, however, that such aid as was given was of a haphazard and personal nature. There were no formal church committees established to help the unemployed. Yet much was expected of the churches. At a meeting of the Unemployment Committee, for example, a Labour spokesman expressed the view that local distress should be dealt with by individual ministers (34). In part, this expectation derived from a realisation that Oamaru's church leaders did more than preach from the pulpit. Many of them actively solicited employment for men out of work (35). Soup kitchens run by the Salvation Army and other churches were never a conspicuous feature of depression life in Oamaru. It was to some extent possible for the

(33) Waitaki Hospital and Charitable Aid, Minute Book, 1928-1936. Expenditure on Relief:		
<u>Years</u>	<u>Total Expenditure</u>	<u>Amount Spent on U/e</u>
1928-29	£ 343. 5.11	no total given
1929-30	375.15. 9	" " "
1930-31	524. 3. 4	" " "
1931-32	660.19. 0	" " "
1932-33	473. 2. 0	£ 233. 7. 4
1933-34	610. 6. 2	32. 2. 6
1934-35	614. 5.11	18. 2. 0
1935-36	599. 5. 3	6. 1. 0

The very high figure spent on unemployment in 1932-33 is perhaps explained by the fact that Board had agreed to build a road through the hospital grounds.

(34) OM 18 Dec 1930.

(35) Archdeacon J.D. Russell is well remembered for his approaches to local industries in order to find work.

jobless to 'live off the land' and this was encouraged by the Unemployment Committee which provided garden plots in the town and sometimes on council reserves (36).

Besides the work of the Charitable Aid Board and the individual churches, there were also isolated community attempts to relieve distress. In July 1931, the town's commercial travellers held a 'drive' in the town to collect clothing, provisions and money for those in need (37). Waitaki Boys' High School presented a concert programme in the town and the proceeds of this were given to the Mayor's Relief Fund (38). The manager of the local picture theatre supplied free passes to the Unemployment Committee for distribution among the men on relief. In 1931 the theatre supplied 20 such passes so that the 80 men then on relief could go to the pictures every fourth week (39). Similarly, the North Otago Rugby Football Union gave the unemployed men concession tickets to its matches. While the North Otago A.&P. Association made available free passes to their shows (40). The local Toc. H. group invited members of the Relief Worker's Association to its variety concerts and the Salvation Army provided them with tickets to other concerts by local groups (41).

(36) See p. 48.

(37) OM 7 July 1931.

(38) NOT 21 Aug 1930..

(39) OM 23 April 1931.

(40) Ibid., 8 Dec 1934.

(41) Ibid., 19 April 1934.

The growth of unemployment in late 1930, however, meant that such charity was spread pretty thinly among the jobless. It was obvious that the depression was not going to end within a matter of months and that a more concerted community effort was necessary.

The organisation set up in Oamaru to deal specifically with unemployment was the Unemployment Committee. This developed as a result of government action. By the Unemployment Act of July 1930, an Unemployment Board had been set up. This initially made a payment of 21/- per week to all registered unemployed. There were allowances of 17/6d for a wife and 4/- for each child. These measures were financed through the Unemployment Fund contributed to by a tax of 30/- per year on every male over 20 years of age. The government also subsidised the fund but the payments were lowered as the numbers of unemployed grew. The board was empowered to work with employers and local bodies to arrange for the employment of the jobless (42).

Operations under this scheme had begun by December 1930, and Oamaru's council was quick to take advantage of it. On 8 December, 1930 an Oamaru Unemployment Committee

(42) AJHR 1930, H.11.B pp. 5-9.

was formed. The committee was chaired by the mayor and contained representatives of all sections of the community, including the local Member of Parliament, J.A. MacPherson (43).

The committee quickly set about its task. It advertised that it would meet every day and asked for employers with work available to inform the committee. It then appointed a sub-committee (F. Simkin, C. Robertson and S. McGregor) to select men registered as unemployed for available jobs. As it promised, the committee met daily throughout December and reported on the number of registered unemployed, the work available and how the work was being distributed. The reports reveal that the committee's efforts were moderately successful. On 17 December 1930, for example, it was reported that:

There are 109 names on the books of the Labor Department, including 20 from Waimate. Fifty-three have been found work during the week. One application received offering work for one man. Employment has been found for another man (44).

-
- (43) OM 8 Dec 1930; the membership of the original committee was as follows:
 Chairman: F. Crawshaw (the mayor);
 Messrs: F. Simkin & E. Symon (labour representatives); T.J. Guthrie (returned soldiers); Adjutant Tong (social workers); S.M.H. Grenfell (Hospital & Charitable Aid Board); W. Forrester & C. Robertson (farming community); J. Fraser & J.M. Wilson (Chamber of Commerce and the community); and S. McGregor (Government Departments).
- (44) Ibid., 17 Dec 1930.

Throughout the depression the committee continued to function in much the same manner. There were, however, some minor changes. From mid-January 1931, the committee met twice-weekly, on Mondays and Thursdays, rather than daily. In June 1931 this became once a week. The work of the committee devolved more and more on the selection committee, the general committee merely sanctioning the decisions.

The Unemployment Committee worked in conjunction with the government schemes to provide work for men on farms and on projects around the town (45). In this last respect they continued the work already begun individually by local groups and they co-ordinated all relief projects. This task of co-ordination was often facilitated by the fact that members of the Unemployment Committee were also connected with local body and community organisations. The committee's closest links, naturally, were with the Oamaru Borough Council and many of the unemployed were absorbed in subsidised council works. At the end of August 1931, for example, the council employed 67 relief workers on various projects (46). This inter-relationship between local

(45) The various government schemes are detailed in Appendix IV, p. 176.

(46) OM 31 Aug 1931.
 These projects were all non-capital intensive:
 20 men at Frome St, loading shingle and stripping at the quarry;
 9 men draining Reserve C, footpath formation and laying a concrete channel in Thames St;
 23 men preparing holes for trees in Reserve A;
 13 men preparing holes for trees in Witham and Arun Sts;
 2 men on sanitation work.

bodies often influenced local groups to make use of government subsidies under Unemployment Schemes 5 and 13. In February 1931, for example, the Unemployment Committee received offers of work from the Oamaru Harbour Board, the Waitaki Hospital Board, the Waitaki High Schools Board, the Education Department and the Otekaieke Drainage Board. Many of those organisations which employed men under the government's schemes were able to carry out works of lasting value. Waitaki Boys' High School, for example, was able to build the stone fences outside the school. The Hospital Board, for the most part, employed men more on maintenance work rather than on long-term projects. One of the most far-reaching local body schemes was that of the Harbour Board. At this time it still appeared as though Oamaru's port had a useful future. A comprehensive plan for extending the wharves and break-water and deepening the harbour level inside the break-water was devised. Although lack of finance prevented its full implementation, the scheme provided considerable employment. The Education Department used government subsidies to improve local school grounds. In February 1931, for example, it offered employment to 15 men levelling and terracing part of the playground at South School and also in fence cutting and trimming at North School (47).

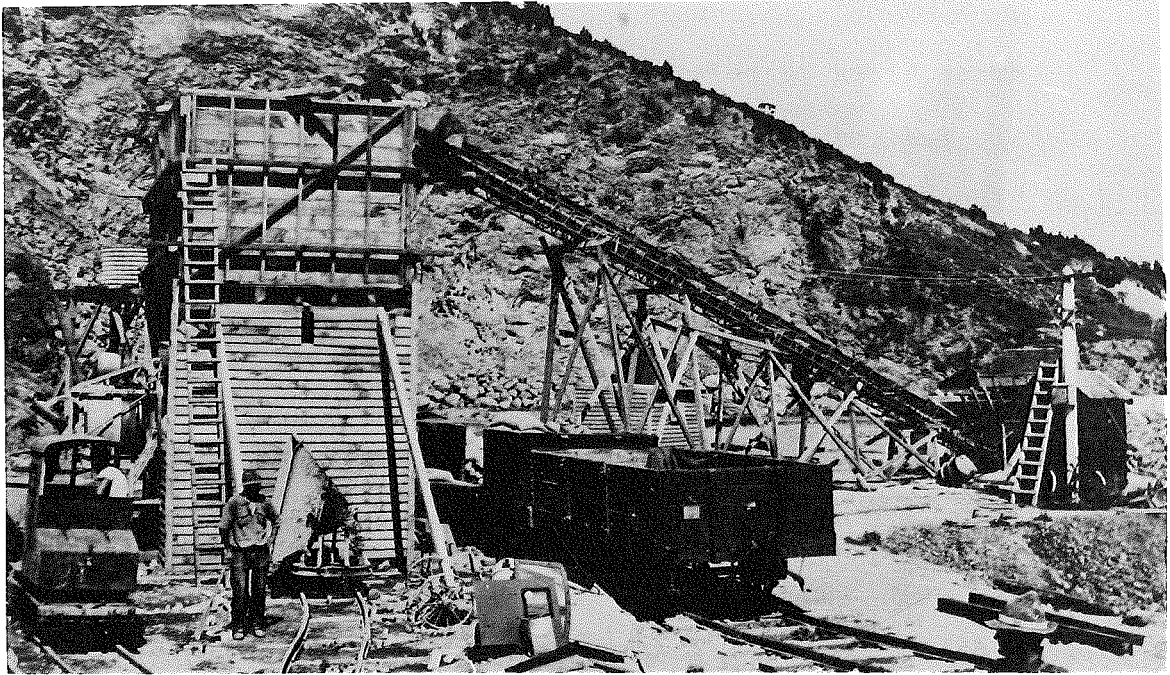
(47) OM 19 Feb 1931.

In Oamaru as elsewhere, however, relief work was not always popular. The work and the workers were the subject of much criticism. The work was often depicted as of little value to the community and the workers said to be idle. Both criticisms converged when an attempt was made to establish a sports ground at the Junction on the South Hill. After several abortive attempts, the project began in August 1933. A varying number of men were employed throughout the depression, usually between 17 and 25 men were working there at any one time, but it was by no means popular work. Most citizens approved the general idea of a sportsground, but were critical of the quality and speed of the workmen. Some complained that the men working on the project were a "bunch of loafers" and that the work was "shoddy and useless" (48). The 'snail's pace' at which the men supposedly worked was the main complaint. The sleeping relief workers buried up at Reserve C have become part of Oamaru's depression folklore - at least among the comfortably off. Viewed from the men's point of view, the work was monotonous and difficult because they were expected to work very difficult ground with picks and shovels. Moreover, they were disinclined to work hard for meagre wages (49).

(48) OM 31 March 1935.

(49) This work continued on until 1937, by which time the government had spent about £16,000 on the ground. Even so, the work was not completed finally until the 1960s.

Fig. 4



The extensions to the break-water. A useful relief project devised by the Harbour Board.



Relief workers employed on general maintenance work in Severn Street. This 'useless' work was very controversial.

(M. Smyth, Historical Collection)

The Unemployment Committee tried to avoid accusations that it was providing makeshift work, but without more finance and machinery there was little it could do. General maintenance work around the town, the mainstay of its relief projects, was always an easy target for critics. Consequently, the committee remained anxious to find permanent work for men wherever possible but this could rarely be done.

One scheme for relief workers which found immediate favour with the committee was that of gold-prospecting. This had the advantage of taking men away from the town and also of giving them a job rather than demeaning maintenance work. The initial proposal had come from the North Otago Farmers' Union, which asked the Unemployment Committee to help any men who wished to go gold prospecting (50). The committee immediately sought permission from the Unemployment Board for the venture. However, the board imposed certain conditions; it must know the names of prospective gold seekers, the areas they had chosen and the reasons for their choice (51). Quite a few single men were lured out of Oamaru in the hope of striking it rich. There are, however, no records of any great fortunes made this way - not even any

(50) OM 8 Feb 1932.

(51) Ibid.

tall stories! Gold mining schemes were all controlled by Unemployment Board regulations. The men were paid at a rate of £1.10s if married and 15/- if single. They had to provide their own equipment but they were entitled to keep any gold found. If the prospectors won a sizeable amount at their site, their weekly wage would be discontinued. Some prospectors were required to pay the board 10 percent of the gold they found and others were provided with the necessary equipment which had to be paid for out of the gold they found (52).

Another scheme, popular in Oamaru, which aimed to move single unemployed men out of the town, was the work on the Steward Settlement water race. A single men's camp was created here and employed 23 single men. The camp was investigated by F. Simkin, the labour representative on the Unemployment Committee, who commented that the men were satisfied with the conditions (53). There do not seem to have been any complaints at all concerning the camp - either about the quality of work or the conditions for the men.

As well as launching work projects, the Unemployment Committee was also interested in encouraging men to help themselves. Early in 1932 the committee mooted a

(52) AJHR H. 35 1932-1933.

(53) OM 21 March 1932.

vegetable growing scheme when those willing to grant land for such a use to the council were asked to come forward (54). Later in February, after approaches from the Unemployment Committee, the Borough Council decided to grant part of Reserve D for vegetable growing (55). Seeds were issued to relief workers by the Relief Depot. Those who wanted to use Reserve D applied to the Unemployment Committee and each received one-tenth of an acre. The Unemployment Board insisted that relief workers cultivate their gardens if they were to remain eligible for relief. There is, however, no evidence of relief having been denied on these grounds (56). To encourage men, the Unemployment Committee offered a prize of two guineas for the best kept plot, to be awarded by the Secretary of the Relief Workers' Association (57).

Finding work for the jobless was, nevertheless, the most important side of the Qamaru Unemployment Committee's work. The most delicate aspect was determining the eligibility of those who appeared before it. The amount of work and thus money received was dependent upon the marital status of the applicant and the number of children or dependents. The possession of a radio or car was regarded as indicating a degree of affluence and disqualified an applicant

(54) Ibid., 20 Jan 1932.

(55) OBC Minute Book 13. 11 Feb 1932. Reserve D was in Chelmer Street beyond the Public Gardens.

(56) OM 5 Dec 1932.

(57) Ibid., 30 Oct 1934.

for relief. During a deputation by relief workers to the Mayor, M. Cooney, some relief workers claimed that radio sets had often been gifts (58). Cooney, however, was in no mood to listen, and brusquely commented that such arguments presumed "too much on the gullibility of those present" (59). His attitude was shared not only by the rest of Unemployment Committee, but also by the committee of the Relief Worker's Association. In a letter to the Oamaru Mail, the Secretary of the Relief Worker's Association expressed the view that a relief worker able to possess a radio was not entitled to a full relief grant (60).

Moral considerations also influenced the committee's deliberations. Evidence of involvement in home-brewing was regarded as a serious disqualification. In September 1933, a special sub-committee reported on the question of home-brewing among the unemployed. This sub-committee had compiled a list of the names of local men whom they alleged were either home-brewers or frequented the homes of persons who were. Men on this list were denied rations or given reduced assistance. The sub-committee, balked however, at reducing aid to men with 'large families' but indicated that they were prepared in future to do so (61).

(58) Ibid., 13 Nov 1933.

(59) Ibid.

(60) Ibid., 14 Nov 1933.

(61) Ibid., 19 Sept 1933.

Whether or not the committee had any right to impose these conditions on unemployed men was never questioned. Equally the right of the committee to spy on the men and see whose homes they visited was not discussed, at least not by the committee members themselves. How the sub-committee managed to observe the comings and goings of the 'brewers' remains a mystery. It can only be assumed they either hid in bushes outside 'known' home-brewers' residences, or else they used 'informers'. If the latter was the case then quite considerable bitterness must have been generated during the home-brewer campaign.

The whole incident, the taking down of names and the suspension of men without giving them any chance to defend themselves seems somewhat sinister but it is partly explained by circumstances. To some extent the adoption of this more rigorous attitude to granting relief coincided with the period of greatest pressure upon relief funds. The campaign against home-brewers also, was indicative of the patronising attitude adopted by Oamaru's leading citizens towards the unemployed. Undoubtedly, the town's Presbyterian background and prohibitionist sympathies were also important. Oamaru's leading citizens prided themselves upon living up to the principles of sobriety, thrift and industry. Unemployed men were certainly not conforming to the second and third of these

principles since they were being supported by the State. A majority of Oamaru's citizens probably considered that there was a causal connection between unemployment and insobriety. Since the unemployed were receiving financial assistance from the State the Unemployment Committee had the right, indeed a moral duty, to specify how such money should be spent.

As well as administering relief to the best of its ability, the Unemployment Committee was also concerned throughout its life to do what was best for Oamaru and to place local considerations before all others. This attitude was shared by other sections of the community and was equally apparent under the chairmanship of the three mayors, (F. Crawshaw 1930-1931; J. Forrester 1931-1933; M.F. Cooney 1933-1935). At the second meeting of the Unemployment Committee, F. Crawshaw made it obvious that what work was available should be reserved for Oamaru men (62). Again, much later, in 1934, when work at Kurow on the Waitaki hydro scheme was coming to an end the Unemployment Committee reacted strongly. Fearful that the town might be swamped by men looking for work, the committee warned that, "there was no prospect of employment and no accommodation in the town for outside labour" (63).

(62) Ibid., 9 Dec 1930.

(63) Ibid., 24 Sept 1934.

This fear of being overrun by hordes of unemployed 'hydro' workers arose partly from the proximity of the scheme to the town and partly from the fact that the Harbour Board had begun work on improving the harbour. It was claimed that unemployed men would expect work on this project and the committee was anxious to dispel any such expectations.

This desire to look after one's own, is a natural response to economic depression, but it often meant specifically excluding strangers. They were someone else's responsibility. Inherent to this inward looking attitude was the desire to win an advantaged position for Oamaru. As will be shown, the committee constantly sought more funds to improve the lot of the unemployed. It would be naive to see their aims as purely altruistic. More money for the relief workers would mean more money in the town generally and local businessmen often publicly expressed this view (64). But Oamaru had to take its place in the queue of local bodies seeking a share of national funds. The inevitable delays and periodic shifts in policy provoked clashes with the national authority for relief, the Unemployment Board. In April 1931, S. McGregor, the Oamaru certifying officer, announced new regulations governing the granting of relief. In future all savings had to be used up before men could qualify for relief. The Oamaru

(64) Ibid., 17 Nov 1933.

Unemployment Committee denounced these new regulations as unnecessarily punishing the frugal and rewarding the extravagant (65).

The same combination of somewhat selfish concern for Oamaru and more genuine humanitarian concern for the jobless prompted the Unemployment Committee to protest against the government's decision to withhold relief payments every fourth week. It complained that such an action meant that families were forced to exist on a less than adequate income (66). The move also meant less revenue for Oamaru. The government's decision to suspend operations under Scheme 5 in June 1931, also drew a rebuke from the committee. Local anger was especially aroused when in July 1931, the Unemployment Board cut Oamaru's grant from £600 to £363. Under pressure the board produced a further £100. Denied any further funds, Oamaru authorities had no alternative but to restrict the scope of their assistance to the unemployed. Single men were for a time to receive two weeks work each month instead of three weeks (67). The restricted help given single men was a foretaste of further cuts, for as conditions worsened, relief work for single men became almost non-existent.

(65) Ibid., 23 April 1931.

(66) Ibid., 25 May 1931.

(67) Ibid., 4 July 1931.

These protests achieved little. They reveal, however, the extent to which the community was prepared to support the demands of local relief workers. In September 1932, the committee received a letter from the Relief Workers' Association objecting to the latest government scheme. This entailed reduced wages and increased working days, and was due to be introduced in October. The Relief Workers' Association felt that this scheme was against the interests of the workers and the general community. The Unemployment Committee shared this view and endorsed the workers' protest (68). Similarly, in December 1932, the committee supported a protest by the Timaru Unemployment Committee and claimed that further cutbacks in relief could only "result in privation for many relief workers and their dependents" (69).

The committee was also ready to help individual unions and groups of workers. This was demonstrated by their protest on behalf of the Waterside Workers' Union in September 1933. The government had begun a system of calculating relief workers' earnings over a four-month period, not one-month as had been done previously. Committee members pointed out that this created hardship for watersiders (70). Presumably, this was because the amount of relief paid was also affected. For watersiders, because

(68) Ibid., 26 Sept 1932.

(69) Ibid., 12 Dec 1932

(70) Ibid., 25 Sept 1933.

of the spasmodic nature of their work, this could mean that their allocation of relief would be considerably reduced since they had received a great deal of work in one month, even though the other three months were virtually workless.

Protests to the government on behalf of particular groups of workers were largely unsuccessful. However, they did have the effect of registering the town's disapproval of the government's measures. Locally they served as evidence that the community was endeavouring to do something positive for the unemployed. Nevertheless, the Unemployment Committee was subjected to much local criticism, both from within its own ranks and from the jobless. The committee had early proof of the fact that local farmers, in particular, did not altogether approve its actions. In December 1930, the committee had sought the aid of the Waitaki County Council and the North Otago Farmers' Union. The reaction of the two bodies to requests for help reveals the attitude shown by most of the rural community to the question of unemployment. They were not prepared to "co-operate with the Unemployment Board in any way unless the wages paid on relief work are reduced considerably" (71). Moreover, one member expressed the belief, common to the comfortable middle class, that many unemployed did not want to work and therefore did not deserve any help (72). They were

(71) Ibid., 20 Dec 1930.

(72) Ibid.

critical also of the committee's decision to pay trade union rates. In their view it encouraged men to prefer relief work to their own jobs (73). The relief rates were higher than many jobs, they claimed. The Farmers' Union was of the same mind and unanimously supported the County Council's resolution (74). The refusal of these two groups to co-operate meant that the committee's major hopes of placing men in jobs - temporary or permanent - were blocked. Many Oamaru men sought seasonal work on farms and the committee had hoped to place men on the land.

Soon after this refusal of help from the best placed section of the community, the committee became embroiled in a conflict within its own ranks. In fact, the two events were somewhat related. This dispute started quite peacefully with a request by a farmer for a subsidy from the committee to help him retain the services of a farm labourer. He requested a subsidy on board and wages. Hopeful that this request signified a softening of farmers' attitudes, the committee granted the subsidy. However, probably in order to impress on farmers the benefits of employing relief workers, the subsidy was an extraordinarily generous one. The committee based their subsidy on a wage of 45/- per week, which was £1 more per week than the labourer had previously received. On the basis of a 10/- in the pound subsidy, it meant that the

(73) Ibid.

(74) Ibid.

farmer was receiving labour at a cost to himself of only 2/6d per week, plus keep. This decision, immediately provoked the resignation of F. Simkin (75), the workers' representative, who declared that "the committee was not a farmers' relief board" (76). The committee's actions came in for mild criticism from the Oamaru Mail. The paper's main objection was not so much the amount of money paid but the fact that the labourer benefitting was not unemployed and that he was single. The Oamaru Mail considered that preference should be given to married unemployed (77). The Unemployment Board felt compelled to remind the Oamaru Committee that it was not to pay any subsidy on lodgings and there the matter rested (78).

It was not only the Farmers' Union and the County Council that declined to help the committee. In February 1931, the chairman of the Unemployment Committee commented that many Oamaru employers were unwilling to offer work because their businesses were unable to pay the regulation 14/- a day. He also commented that quite a few of the unemployed were willing to work for less (79).

(75) F. Simkin was later re-elected to the Unemployment Committee as a Labour Party representative.

(76) OM 20 Dec 1930.

(77) Ibid., 22 Dec 1930.

(78) Ibid., 13 Jan 1931.

(79) Ibid., 2 Feb 1931.

The committee also frequently found itself facing protests and objections from those it was aiming to help. As the economic situation worsened during 1932 and 1933, the numbers of deputations from the unemployed rose. In January and February 1932, at a time when feelings were reaching flash point in the main centres, the committee was confronted with two deputations from the Relief Workers' Association. They demanded work for single men and more work for married men. J. Forrester, the chairman, countered by pointing out that the committee was the victim of circumstances. It was endeavouring to dispense equitably what funds it had and it constantly appealed to the Unemployment Board for more assistance (80). With this the relief workers had to be satisfied. The committee's own helplessness was apparent.

On occasions the committee found itself caught between the demands of the unemployed and those of the local trade unionists. In April 1932, for example, the Allied Building Trade employees sent a deputation to the Unemployment Committee. They sought the committee's support for their opposition to relief workers tendering for and obtaining contract work. The committee decided to support the unionists and passed a resolution that relief

(80) Ibid., 8 Feb 1932.

workers should not compete against Allied Building trade employees in tendering for contracts. This resolution drew a lot of fire on the committee, especially from those most affected, the relief workers (81). In May, they appealed to the Deputy Prime Minister, J.G. Coates, to over-rule the committee's decision. In the event, Coates sided with the relief workers and stated that,

There appears to be no reason why persons now unemployed should not tender for contracts in the ordinary way, any instruction to the contrary must be due to misunderstanding (82).

A continuous fear harboured by the Unemployment Committee was that men dismissed from the Waitaki hydro-scheme would descend on Oamaru. In 1932 their fears were heightened by rumours of wholesale dismissals at Kurow. The committee passed a resolution saying that it viewed the dismissals apprehensively and requested that the men be re-employed under Scheme 5 (83). Towards the end of June 1932, the Oamaru Mail carried details of 30 further dismissals, including some men with families. It commented dryly that:

If the local authority is to be responsible for the relief of those turned away from Waitaki it will find its funds sorely embarrassed (84).

In the event, the funds were never put to the test.

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- (81) Ibid., 23 April 1932.
 - (82) Ibid., 7 May 1932.
 - (83) Ibid., 13 June 1932.
 - (84) Ibid., 18 June 1932.

In July 1932, it was a deputation of single men which confronted the committee. They protested about the lack of work provided for them. However, all the committee was able to do was listen to their case and then instruct S. McGregor, the certifying officer, to carry on to the best of his ability with what there was (85).

The committee's work came to an abrupt halt in 1933 when it became involved in a political wrangle. The first intimation of trouble was a bald statement by the Oamaru Mail, in July, that:

There was no meeting of the Oamaru Unemployment Committee yesterday as that body had asked the Unemployment Board to disband them and set up a new committee (86).

The immediate cause of the dissolution, it later appeared, was the fact that some members of the committee objected to the continued presence of F. Simkin, the labour representative, on the committee. In 1932 J. McNab and Simkin were elected to the committee as representatives of the workers generally by the Oamaru branch of the Labour Party. The branch's annual meeting in 1933 nominated F. Poole to succeed McNab (87). The latter, however, refused to resign from the Unemployment Committee. The matter became more confused when the mayor, J. Forrester, refused to

(85) Ibid., 4 July 1932.

(86) Ibid., 19 July 1933.

(87) Ibid., 26 Aug 1933.

accept Poole on the committee, an action which provoked Simkin to withdraw. The executive committee of the Labour Party withdrew its endorsement of both Simkin and McNab (88). Delegates from the industrial unions then elected two representatives of labour generally for the committee (89). After being informed they were entitled to only one delegate they nominated A. McLelland as their sole representative. Simkin, under the impression that McNab now intended to step down, did not attend several meetings. However, when he discovered this was not the case he returned. Some committee members questioned whether or not he had any right to attend as the Labour Party had withdrawn its nomination of him. Simkin, however, argued that the same case could be made against McNab. Three committee members then refused to remain on the committee unless Simkin withdrew and they walked out of the meeting. Unable to find a solution to this problem the committee voted to dissolve itself (90).

The membership question was only an effect, not the cause of the committee's difficulties. It would probably have been settled amicably except for one vital factor. In the midst of the wrangling the local body elections were held. J. Forrester had resigned as mayor and M.F. Cooney, the deputy-mayor had taken his place after an

(88) Ibid.,

(89) Ibid., 19 June 1933.

(90) Ibid., 22 Aug 1933.

uncontested election. This was undoubtedly the determining factor. Cooney and McGregor, the government representatives on the committee, came into immediate conflict. Cooney alleged that McGregor ignored the committee and acted virtually as a local autocrat dispensing relief as it suited him (91). McGregor, on the other hand, apparently thought Cooney a menace to the smooth-running of the committee. When the difficulties over the labour representative arose, Cooney had tried to resolve the issue by asking to consult the committee's constitution. McGregor informed him that no such constitution existed and the only course available was to disband the committee (92). McGregor's statement was not strictly true, as Cooney later discovered, since a constitution did exist. However, the dispute presented McGregor with an opportunity to rid himself of a committee which was no longer completely in accord with his thinking. Thus when he came to report to the Unemployment Board about the dissolution of the committee, McGregor recommended that because of the presence of Cooney as mayor, no new committee should be formed (93).

The Unemployment Board followed his advice and, instead of appointing a new committee, selected two men, C. Robertson and J. McNab to assist McGregor. The appointment of the triumvirate inflamed, rather than ended the

(91) Ibid., 24 July 1933.

(92) Ibid., 22 Aug 1933.

(93) Ibid.

controversy. On 22 August the affair exploded into the public view in earnest (94). On the evening of 21 August a deputation of unemployed men met the mayor, M.F. Cooney, the local Member of Parliament, J.A. MacPherson, and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce, J.M. Wilson, and Retailers' Association, H. Familton. The unemployed were concerned about the lowered allocation of relief money to Oamaru, the break up of the Unemployment Committee and a recent announcement that married men would be sent to the Waitaki hydro works (95). At this meeting both sides agreed that Oamaru had been slighted by the government's action. Cooney alleged that the Unemployment Board was accepting the jaundiced judgement of McGregor rather than consulting with local authorities. He made it clear that the certifying officer's decision to send married and single men to the Waitaki scheme had been a source of conflict (96). The Unemployment Committee had decided not to compel men to accept the work at the 'hydro' but McGregor had ignored their views (97).

The meeting agreed with Cooney that the Wellington appointed triumvirate of McGregor, Robertson and McNab, were dealing more harshly with relief workers than the committee had done (98). The local Member of Parliament,

(94) Ibid.
 (95) Ibid.
 (96) Ibid.
 (97) Ibid.
 (98) Ibid.

J.A. MacPherson of the United Party, endorsed this view and gave an example of the harsher treatment meted out to the jobless. A married man displayed a certain initiative and developed a vegetable plot of sufficient size for it to become a commercial proposition. Before he could benefit from his hard work, he was given an ultimatum: he either went to the 'hydro' or relief would be stopped. This meant the end of his garden scheme. Moreover, when the Waitaki scheme ended the man would again be a charge on the Relief Fund.

MacPherson had good reason to be critical of the way the administrative changes were implemented. Originally he had been approached by some of the citizens of Oamaru to have the Unemployment Committee reconstituted. He then consulted the Minister of Employment, who initially claimed the committee was not needed. When MacPherson again contacted the minister he was wrongly informed that a committee had been set up. To break this apparent deadlock, Cooney, MacPherson and three representatives of the unemployed confronted McGregor with their complaints. It was a fiery meeting, in which Cooney and McGregor were constantly at loggerheads. The heart of the mayor's criticism was that McGregor had exceeded his authority and ignored the wishes of the citizens of Oamaru.

The meeting highlighted the fact that outside of the personal conflict between McGregor and Cooney, the dispute was an example of a clash between the locality and the centre. The Oamaru community felt that it was not being given sufficient say in running unemployment relief in the town. Instead, national considerations were being pushed to the fore by McGregor as the government's representative. This can be seen in the dispute over sending men to the 'hydro' works. McGregor was accused of desiring only to fulfill the quota of men needed for the Waitaki scheme and not being interested in specific cases (99). Oamaru's citizens, on the other hand, did not approve of men being sent to Kurow because of the harsh conditions there, and also because it meant a loss of revenue to the town. The meeting made it quite clear that Oamaru wanted some say in the control of relief and it was not content with merely accepting directives from Wellington (100).

In the event, Oamaru's complaints persuaded Wellington officials to change their minds. On 5 September 1933, MacPherson reported that a new Unemployment Committee was to be appointed (101). The victory for local interests was complete when just one month later, McGregor was

(99) Ibid.

(100) Ibid.

(101) Ibid., 5, 11 Sept 1933. The composition of the committee largely followed that of the previous one: The Mayor, M.F. Cooney (Chairman); Messrs: R.A. McDowell, A.C. McLelland, R.K. Gardiner, W. Forrester J. McNab, C. Robertson, T.J. Guthrie and N.H. Colquhoun. The presence of J. McNab and not F. Simkin suggests the settling of that particular dispute.

transferred from Oamaru to Nelson. This transfer revealed the acceptance by Wellington officials that the local community was entitled to a major share in the administration of relief to the unemployed. McGregor was replaced by G. Adair and from this point on, the committee's existence was untroubled by any quarrels or major disagreements. Adair appears to have been willing to accept direction by the committee and administer relief without attempting to dominate decision-making. For its part, the reconstituted committee stressed its parochial attitude to relief by its very first action. It immediately wrote to the Unemployment Board complaining that the allocation of relief money was not sufficient to meet Oamaru's needs (102).

Thus, the Oamaru Unemployment Committee, although established through government regulations and dependent on the government for finance, managed to retain some independence. The committee's major aim was to provide for the unemployed in a way which gained most advantage for Oamaru. Its work could not be judged an unqualified success. The failure to help single men, and in many cases the pointless nature of the work offered, can all be held against it. Nevertheless,

(102) Ibid., 11 Sept 1933.

considering the economic conditions under which it operated, the committee's work, undoubtedly, did much to alleviate the distress which was caused by the sudden upsurge in unemployment levels. In addition, much of the work which the committee undertook, such as extensions to the break-water, the formation of the Marine Parade track, and improvements to local school facilities, was of lasting value to the community.

CHAPTER THREEFURTHER RELIEF MEASURES

The task of finding employment for the jobless was not, however, the sole answer to distress in the 1930s. The relief pay for unemployed men came nowhere near meeting the cost of necessities of life and there were many who were ineligible for help from the Unemployment Committee. To meet this need in Oamaru there were two other organisations specifically concerned with relief. In addition, there were movements from the community generally to provide some type of aid. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the range and effectiveness of these moves.

The major burden of charitable aid, fell upon a Women's Relief Committee which was established in 1931. The first moves towards establishing an organisation for the relief of distress among the victims of the depression began in May 1931. In that month the mayor-ess, Mrs J. Forrester, called a meeting of local women to "consider ways and means of alleviating distress" (1). At the meeting the need for special assistance for women and children was emphasised. The committee did not subscribe to the then current belief that female unemployment was relatively unimportant since somewhere in the

(1) OM 16 May 1931.

background there was usually a male to provide support. It was intended that the committee work in conjunction with the Waitaki Hospital and Charitable Aid Board since they had similar aims and functions.

The committee comprised representatives of all local churches, Plunket Society, Newborough, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Public Hospital and medical practitioners. This was to be mainly a vigilance committee, constantly on the watch for distressed and needy cases. Throughout its life it went under many titles. Originally, it was known as the Women Citizen's Relief Committee. Most commonly it was referred to by the local newspapers as the Mayoress' Relief Committee, and that is the title used here. However, it was also known as the Women's Relief Committee, the Citizen's Relief Committee, the Mayoress' Committee or just the Relief Committee. There was also a male organisation attached to the women's group known as the Mayoress' Advisory Committee.

The Mayoress' Relief Committee decided initially that all unemployed women and girls should register, and that an attempt should be made to find them work (2). It was not, however, until October 1932, that a committee report carried any mention of this register. At this

(2) Ibid., 19 May 1931.

time there were 21 women registered, of whom seven had been found employment. Each applicant was given a registration card which recorded all relevant facts about rent paid, income received, number of dependent children and the extent of government allowances (3).

The committee's major work was to be in providing groceries and clothing for those in need. To finance its operations, the committee resorted to the perennial jumble sale. By the end of May 1931, the committee was making a general public appeal for old clothing. Women's Guilds and other groups were engaged in making clothes for women but the committee stressed the need for men's clothing and footwear and blankets (4).

The committee's services were called upon immediately and throughout its first year in operation its clientele increased rapidly. One month after its initiation, the committee was providing regular relief for 35 families. Temporary assistance was also being given to other families. Three months later at the end of September this number had jumped dramatically. There were, by then, 115 families receiving regular relief - that is 243 adults and 327 children. There were also 23 single men and some other families who were receiving occasional help (5).

(3) Ibid., 6 Oct 1931.

(4) Ibid., 26 June 1931.

At first the committee hoped to close the Relief Depot with the advent of summer and the availability of seasonal work. In the first year of operations, as a preliminary to its summer closure, the hours of the depot were reduced. A prolonged drought which delayed seasonal farm-work, however, persuaded the committee to remain in operation (6). To cope with continued demand, the committee resorted to placing charity boxes at various grocery stores. The response was slow. On 2 November the committee announced that its funds were almost exhausted and pleaded for donations of money, food or clothing (7). On 15 December, 1931, the committee finally ceased operations for the year. In a brief resumé of what had been achieved, the mayoress, Mrs J. Forrester, reported that the relief depot had helped 135 families - 236 adults and 420 children (8).

The Relief Committee began operations again early in 1932, but its unpopularity with some sections of the community was coming more to the fore. There were rumblings of discontent about the treatment being received by those requiring relief. The main grievances of those seeking help at the depot were the type of questions asked there and the allegedly condescending attitude of the depot officials (9).

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- (6) Ibid., 27 Nov 1931.
 - (7) Ibid., 2 Nov 1931.
 - (8) Ibid., 15 Dec 1931.
 - (9) Ibid., 24 Mar 1932.

In response to these complaints the Oamaru Mail investigated the operations of the Relief Depot. The paper's report dismissed the complaints and praised the work of the committee. Moreover, the report denounced some of those seeking relief as "professional beggars" (10). The enquiry prompted the mayoress to make a considered public statement. The same questions, she said, were put to all applicants. She went on to specify the committee's requirements. Anyone who owned a freehold house or who failed to keep up regular rent payments could only receive groceries in 'stand down week' or if it was a large family they would receive a smaller amount of groceries. The committee, was obliged, in the interests of fairness, to check up on all these facts before dispensing relief, the mayoress explained (11). The newspaper report prompted a series of letters to the paper in which insults and bouquets were variously traded.

The fuss eventually died down, however, without anything having been achieved by either side and the Relief Committee returned to its major function - that of dispensing relief. In addition to groceries and clothing, the unemployed were also able to obtain meat. A meat card entitled one to 3lb of meat per week. The meat was

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ibid.

prepared and distributed among relief workers by a local butcher - J. Meikle - who portioned 20 to 30 sheep a week, free of charge. The meat, at first, was paid for out of the mayoress' funds and early in the period when the money ran out Meikle supplied the meat himself. Later, however, farmers donated the necessary sheep.

The committee also dispensed 11b bags of flour which were supplied free by the various mills around Oamaru, Milligan's Eclipse Flour Mill, for instance, supplied about five tons of flour over the period the depot was open and the three other mills supplied similar amounts.

The increasing distress in the town, and thus the larger burden the Relief Committee was forced to carry is demonstrated by the changes in routine, which the committee announced in August 1932. It was decided that the distribution of clothing during 'stand down week' would have to cease, and that children would have to be kept out of the depot altogether unless they were there for clothing or shoes. People were also asked to arrive at the depot armed with two separate lists for clothing and groceries. These moves reveal the need by the depot to streamline its activities in order to cope with the escalating workload (12).

(12) Ibid., 13 Aug 1932.

Local businesses often came to the committee's aid. The management of the Majestic Theatre announced in August 1932 that the price of admission to the theatre for one night would be a parcel of groceries or dried fruit to be distributed among the local unemployed. This proved to be a very successful venture with some 620 parcels collected (13). Despite such ventures, however, by the beginning of December 1932, the Relief Committee was sorely pressed for funds. At this point it was helping 150 married men with 424 children under 16. This was a load which proved too heavy to carry and in December the depot closed its doors until March 1933 (14).

During the two years the committee had operated, till March 1933, it had collected £1,270.14s. It had provided food and clothing for 274 families - including over 520 children (15).

Despite this substantial achievement, the committee exhibited the same isolationist tendencies as did other sections of the community. It was created specifically to further the interests of its own citizens and not outsiders. In April 1933, the committee passed a resolution to the effect that it was unable to grant aid to unemployed families who had recently come into the town (16). The

(13) Ibid., 25 Aug 1932.
 (14) Ibid., 14 Mar 1933.
 (15) Ibid.
 (16) Ibid., 1 April 1933.

committee felt that if relief was granted to some, then many such families might appear on its doorstep. Such was the extent of local parochialism that this refusal to help was extended to include the residents of Hampden scarcely more than 20 miles distant (17).

In 1933 the men's section of the Relief Committee decided to instigate weekly 'community sings' in order to ensure a continual supply of funds for the committee's work. These began in June 1933. They were generally held between 12-30 and 1 p.m. in the Opera House. They were extremely popular and two years after their inauguration they were going stronger than ever. It was not uncommon even in 1935, for people to be turned away from the 'sing' because all the seats were filled (18). They proved also to be a very good source of revenue and during 1935, the committee reported that of the £1,700 raised generally that year, for the relief of distress, £250 had been raised by the 'community sings' (19).

Besides the 'community sings' money for the Relief Depot was also raised in 1933 by means of a Queen Carnival and a rodeo, and in 1934 money was provided from the proceeds of the national Art Union. These extra forms of revenue were very necessary during the winter of 1933 when the demands on the depot were greater than ever before.

(17) Ibid., 20 June 1933.
 (18) Ibid., 25 Aug 1935.
 (19) Ibid., 16 Oct 1935.

Originally established as an organisation to aid women, the committee quickly became a relief body for the general community and women's special needs were, if not ignored, then given a secondary position. As in other parts of New Zealand unemployed women in Oamaru received on the whole little support. The register of unemployed women, mooted at the first committee meeting, was mentioned only once in committee reports, in August 1932. From then it apparently lapsed as the committee became more involved in general relief with no time or money left over to care for the specific needs of unemployed women.

One group in the community which did receive special attention was that of unemployed boys. From the beginning of the depression, Oamaru, in common with most areas in the Dominion was anxious about the effect unemployment was having on its youth. It was feared that with so much time on their hands the young would lose sight of the necessary values of honesty and hard work. Instead, they would become lazy, shiftless, dishonest and of little value to the country in later life (20). However, despite these fears, nothing concrete was done in Oamaru until 1932 when the Boys' Employment Committee was established. The inaugural meeting was held early in

(20) Boys' Employment Committee Minute Book, 14 June 1932.

June 1932, when a committee of 25 was set up to deal with the problem, with J.C. Kirkness, a local real estate agent, as Honorary Secretary (21). The committee established a register of all unemployed youths and endeavoured to find work for them (22). It was obvious from the start, however, that a committee of 25 would be far too unwieldy for organising and running the work effectively. As a consequence on 21 June 1932, the original committee was disbanded and four separate committees formed. Each committee had three members and all were expected to find employment for boys in specific areas. The committee attempting to find work on farms had six members in recognition of the fact that this was the area where most boys could possibly find work (23).

On July 5, an additional committee was set up to consider ways of giving technical instruction to boys. Also, the committee discussed establishing a farm-school in the district (24).

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- (21) Kirkness was the motivating force behind the original idea. He had been a member of the Waitaki Hospital Board since 1926. He stood for parliament in 1931 but was defeated. He was elected to the Oamaru Borough Council in 1933 and became Mayor of Oamaru during World War II.
 - (22) Boys' Employment Committee, Minute Book, 14 June 1932.
 - (23) Ibid., 21 June 1932.
 - (24) Ibid., 5 July 1932.

Finding employment for boys proved difficult, if not impossible, and the committee turned to considering ways of keeping the boys usefully occupied. In line with this view the Boys' Employment Committee approved the following resolution from the Technical Committee:

- (1) That the High School Boards be asked to place buildings and equipment at the disposal of the committee.
- (2) Morning classes of three hours duration, five days a week be instituted in, e.g., wood-work, tin-smithing and basket-making.
- (3) That boys be required to attend for two hours on five afternoons, for instructions in physical culture, first aid, community singing, sports and lectures.
- (4) If necessary working parties be organised for the cultivation of allotments.
- (5) The Unemployment Committee be asked to appoint the necessary instructors and supervisors from among unemployed adults upon the nomination of this committee.
- (6) That the Hon. Secretary be requested to ascertain how many boys would be willing to enrol, each boy to receive 5/- weekly, conditional on attending both morning and afternoon sessions to the supervisor's and instructor's satisfaction.
- (7) That steps be taken to raise an initial fund of at least £150 (25).

Instruction and classes under this scheme began immediately. As well as finding jobs and providing instruction for boys, the committee also provided relief work around the town. The major project undertaken was the building of two small foot bridges in the Oamaru Gardens. The idea was advanced by a member of the committee, H.J. Jenkins, at

(25) Ibid., 19 July 1932.

the meeting on 16 August, 1932. The Technical Committee looked into the scheme and produced its plan of work - six boys were to be employed immediately on the iron-work of one bridge and were to be supervised by tradesmen (26). These boys, too, were paid 5/- a week. By 21 November, 1933, the iron girders for both bridges had been completed and were ready for erection (27). The work at this point was handed over to the Borough Council for completion by unemployed men. As well as the bridge, boys were also given work in erecting seats around the Public Gardens and in general, maintenance work.

Local firms were also involved in keeping the boys occupied. The local engineering firm of W.E. Reid agreed to take three boys for instruction, with the possibility of later permanent work for them and others (28). Some businesses provided the committee with equipment, such as carpenter's benches.

The unemployed boys were also put to work establishing a vegetable garden in the grounds of Middle School. The vegetables grown were either offered for sale, or distributed among the unemployed. (29) The wooden articles and toys which the boys made in woodwork classes were also sent to the depot and sold at the 'community sings' (30). The boys were also kept busy in the instruction classes

(26) Ibid., 30 Aug 1932.

(27) Ibid., 21 Nov 1933.

(28) Ibid., 30 Aug 1932.

(29) Ibid., 27 Feb 1934.

(30) Ibid.

organised by the Technical Committee. The instructors for most of these technical classes came from the ranks of the unemployed. This instruction work was rated as relief work by the Unemployment Committee and the Boys Committee subsidised the men's wages during their normal 'stand down' week, in order to keep the classes going (31).

The question of finance was always a major problem facing the Boys Unemployment Committee. The major source of finance was the local public body organisations. In August 1932, the Oamaru Borough Council voted £50 to the committee (32). The Waitaki County Council likewise made a grant of £25 (33). Public generosity also helped the committee but only to a limited extent. The wooden toys made by the boys were sold and provided some revenue. In July 1933, a local drama group staged the play "Nothing But The Truth" for the benefit of the Boys Committee and a profit of £117.6s.1d was made. The money gained in these various ways was, however, nowhere near enough and the committee launched a membership drive aimed at producing 500 members. These members would be supporters of the Boys Committee and would be expected, besides paying an annual membership fee, to help the committee with its financial burden. There was, however, little public response (34). Consequently, by January 1933 the committee

(31) Ibid.

(32) OBC Minute Book 13. 25 Aug 1932.

(33) Boys Employment Committee Minute Book. 27 Sept 1932.

(34) Ibid., 20 Dec 1932.

was forced to make cuts in its expenditure. The payments to boys who attended technical classes were the major drain on revenue. To cut down this expenditure the committee considered refusing further instruction to all boys who refused to work on farms when directed to do so. However, they decided to avoid this serious step and instead all classes ceased on 3 February and did not recommence until mid-winter (35).

The difficulty in financing the scheme coincided with an increase in the number of boys seeking aid. In the year from the committee's beginnings in 1932, to June 1933, there were 154 boys registered as unemployed (36). The committee provided work of a temporary nature for 113 boys. Fortunately for the committee's finances, this proved to be the worst year and the numbers declined thereafter. For the nine months from June 1933 till February 1934, there were 114 boys registered, for whom 132 jobs were found (37). The following year there were fewer boys registered - 85 altogether with 120 jobs provided (38). These jobs were, mainly of a temporary nature.

Despite its financial problems the Boys Committee exhibited a willingness to help all unemployed boys whether they came from Oamaru or not. In November 1933, for example,

(35) Ibid., 17 Jan 1933.

(36) Ibid., 6 June 1933.

(37) Ibid., 5 Mar 1935.

the committee decided that boys from other districts should be treated on the same basis as local boys (39). This is in marked contrast to the attitude of the other groups administering relief who were anxious to shun outsiders and concentrate their relief efforts on the poor in Oamaru alone.

Although primarily concerned to help boys, the committee finally in July 1933, considered the question of unemployed girls. They decided to examine the problem and discussed offering a subsidy to employers willing to employ girls (40). There, however, the matter lapsed although the committee did eventually provide classes for girls in sewing and dressmaking (41). However, this decision came when the committee was on its last legs and the classes never eventuated.

The committee also concerned itself with the needs of boys still in school as well as those who were unemployed. In February 1933, a proposal that boys at Waitaki High School be given part-time training in local commercial houses was considered. It was hoped that such training

(39) Ibid., 21 Nov 1933.
(40) Ibid., 4 July 1933
(41) Ibid., 9 April 1934.

would prepare them more adequately for leaving school and obtaining a job. The committee wrote to the Minister of Education, the Hon. R. Masters, and to two Members of Parliament, A.E. Ansell (42) and J.A. MacPherson, the local member, about this idea. The Education Department offered no objection. Ansell, on the other hand, was less convinced and pointed out that a similar scheme in Wellington had largely failed. The committee seemed to accept the latter's doubts and abandoned the scheme (43).

The Boys' Committee ran into early problems with the Ministry of Defence. In its efforts to help the boys, the committee had decided to use the Drill Hall for meetings and instruction. However, the Ministry of Defence demanded a payment for the use of the hall, which the committee refused to pay. The mayor, J. Forrester, stressed that the Drill Hall had been built by the citizens of Oamaru and then presented to the Defence Department on the understanding that its use would always be free for the town and its citizens. This dispute continued through 1932 with the Boys' Committee determined not to pay and eventually in 1933 the Defence Department was forced to capitulate (44).

(42) A.E. Ansell was particularly interested in the question of employment for boys. In June 1932, he, along with S.G. Smith had been requested by the Coalition Government to enquire into the problems and needs of unemployed boys.

(43) Boys' Employment Committee Minute Book, 14 Mar 1933.

(44) Ibid., 27 Sept, 17 Oct 1932, 14 Feb 1933.

One feature of the committee's work through 1933, which increasingly distressed members was the number of very young boys seeking help. The committee claimed that it should only be dealing with boys 15 years of age and over, and it made strenuous efforts to encourage boys under 15 to return to school. In this respect the committee sent two resolutions to the Minister of Education, R.Masters, the first requesting that provisions available to make 15 years of age the legal school leaving age be put into effect (45). The second, suggested that the leaving age be raised (46). As well, the committee decided to no longer automatically admit boys under 15 years of age to its technical classes (47). In future such youths were to be admitted at the discretion of the Technical Committee. However, this clause would have had little effect, for soon afterwards the classes were closed for good.

This closure of the classes had come about mainly through the apathy displayed by the boys generally, which always seriously hampered the committee's work. The committee's first experience with the boys not conforming to their aims came soon after its inception when difficulty was experienced in finding boys willing to go on farms for work. The Boys Committee members undoubtedly shared the

(45) Ibid., 27 Feb 1934.

(46) Ibid.

(47) Ibid.

view of many Oamaruvians that farming was the main answer to New Zealand's problems (48). The local farms offered the best means of finding employment for the boys and would also undoubtedly help form them into useful, worthwhile citizens. The committee was at a loss to understand the unwillingness of many boys to accept this offer of a steady job. In October 1932, the committee sent circulars to parents to obtain their co-operation in encouraging boys to offer for country work. However, it seems that parents also shared the boys' reluctance in this respect. This was mainly because parents felt that the boys were being sent too far away for too low a wage. There were some complaints of boys receiving no wage - only board while on a farm and thus being forced to walk if they wished to return home (49). Moreover, in some cases, boys contributed to the family income and carried the burden of work round the home. If they were sent to farms the income and help were lost to the family.

In July 1933, the committee had to seek new means of enticing or ordering boys to farms. Boys were to be asked to volunteer for farm positions. If the boys still refused to go their names were to be removed from the roll of the technical classes (50). However, this was probably an empty threat in many ways for many boys seemed unwilling to attend the classes.

(48) See Ch. 1, p. 11.

(49) Boys Employment Committee, Minute Book. 8 Nov 1932.

(50) Ibid., 31 July 1933.

An emergency meeting of the Boys' Committee was held in April 1934, to discuss the falling numbers of boys attending technical classes. The committee decided to try and encourage boys and girls to attend the classes offered by the Waitaki High School Board, and to pay the fees of those who were unable to afford to do so. The main concentration was to be on encouraging boys to attend the building and construction classes, and the girls to attend the classes in sewing and dressmaking (51). It was thought that at the sewing classes the girls could make some clothes for themselves and to distribute to those in need. This scheme, however, also failed, and in July 1934, it was announced that the technical classes were to be closed down for two seasons - although this became a permanent closure (52).

The Boys' Employment Committee continued on for two more years until April 1936. The real work, however, was done solely by its secretary, J.C. Kirkness. He had been one of the early motivators of the scheme and as the secretary, most of the real work fell on him. After the closure of classes in 1934, the task of finding jobs for unemployed boys became his sole responsibility, and when in April 1936, he decided to retire and travel overseas, the committee was disbanded altogether and all funds still in hand were paid over to the Borough Council.

(51) Ibid., 9 April 1934.

(52) Ibid., 16 July 1934.

Relief for the unemployed, however, was not just left to the ministrations of these organised committees. The citizens, generally made some specific attempts to alleviate the situation. One of the first of these came in 1932 at the height of unemployment problems. A meeting of all Oamaru local bodies and interested citizens was concerned with finding ways and means of continuing help to those in distress. It was necessary because the Mayoress' Depot which had been in existence for one year was on the point of collapse. This meeting decided to inaugurate sub-committees in farming districts to collect and distribute produce from farms for the needy (53). However, these were never heard of again.

Another local body meeting became necessary in 1933 when the government decided to reduce the allocation of relief to provincial towns. Those at this meeting were disgruntled by the fact that money was being raised in Oamaru for the relief of unemployment and was then being spent in cities. The mayor, M.F. Cooney, also expressed the opinion that the Unemployment Board's activities should be investigated. He claimed it was buying land and spending money on Scheme 10, all of which absorbed funds that should go for relief. It was also generally felt that relief allocations should be on a percentage basis.

(53) OM 18 June 1932.

Oamaru, it was claimed, had an unemployment figure of one in 12, whereas the national average was one in 19 (54). These criticisms of the board came soon after the clash between the local Unemployment Committee and the board, and this undoubtedly accounts for much of the hostility.

In 1934, the local bodies gathered together again, this time:

to consider schemes likely to absorb the unemployed in more useful work of a kind which would be more beneficial to the unemployed themselves (55).

The meeting considered such schemes as the Harbour Board's plan for extending breakwater, tree-planting and a water-intake scheme for Maerewhenua (56). The uselessness of these discussions is demonstrated by the reassembling of the conference just five months later (57). This time the conference was initiated by the local branch of the Labour Party (58). It was once again concerned with finding work for unemployed men and the Labour Party sent representatives with a list of recommendations. The main aim was to move away from the idea of relief work and try to get men re-employed permanently. The meeting was followed up by a series of advertisements urging the people

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- (54) Ibid., 21 Nov 1933.
 - (55) Ibid., 31 Jan 1934.
 - (56) Ibid.
 - (57) Ibid., 9 June 1934.
 - (58) Ibid., 17 May 1934.

of Oamaru and the Waitaki County to offer work to the unemployed (59). However, nothing more concrete appears to have been achieved.

Thus the Oamaru community generally attempted, with varying degrees of success to find some answer to the problem of high unemployment and the consequent distress. The work of the community's leaders in this respect covered most areas of need. The motives and attitudes of some of the leading citizens might be questionable, and naturally the idea that the unemployed were responsible for their own fate never entirely disappeared. It would have been surprising if it did. There were some very valid criticisms of the work of the various committees, but these shall be examined later. All the groups naturally ran into difficulties. The Women's Committee was forced to abandon its original intentions of helping unemployed women and concentrate on general community distress. The Boys Employment Committee discovered that the boys it sought to help, were not always suited or willing to do what the committee felt they should. The local body meetings were able to achieve little of any real value. Despite all these failings, however, the Oamaru community exercised a large degree of responsibility towards those in need, and there were few who failed to receive any help from the various relief measures undertaken.

(59) Ibid., 16 June 1934.

CHAPTER FOURTHE WORKERS AND THE UNEMPLOYED 1929 - 1935.

Oamaru, a home for 'retired members of the middle classes' had little place in its self-image for the members of the wage-earning group. Nevertheless, in the 1930s, this section of the community became increasingly important as more and more of its members joined the ranks of the unemployed. This chapter, therefore, examines the role and actions of the wage-earners and the unemployed in Oamaru society in the 1930s.

One important feature of working in Oamaru was that, especially for unskilled labourers, work was dominated by the seasons. The local farms and freezing works provided summer employment and during the winter, work was sought, either in Oamaru on local projects, on farms, in rabbitting, or maintenance work. Some workers moved further afield. During the 1920s much of the winter labour surplus was easily absorbed in the Oamaru Borough Council's drainage work, or in the building industry. However, by 1928 the council project had come to an end and nothing further was planned. The building industry was also beginning to scale down its activities. Farmers, too, were faced with a falling income and were offering far less work. Throughout the depression seasonal

variation always remained in evidence. The number of unemployed usually rose from May to November and then fell somewhat. In the depth of depression, however, seasonal employment accounted for only a negligible proportion of the unemployed (1).

Trade unions in Oamaru lacked strength and unity. This is partly explained by Oamaru's economy and geographic position. As a predominantly rural service town, it did not develop a large labour force. There were eight registered unions, with about 400 members altogether in Oamaru in the 1930s (2). Allowances must be made, however, for the fact that some trade unions did not have registered offices in Oamaru while others working in a particular industry would not belong to a union (3). This probably meant that unionists accounted for about only one quarter of the work force. Close employer/employee relationships also account for the low level of union activity and effectiveness. If the men knew the 'boss', then equally the 'boss' knew the men. 'Troublemakers' could be quickly removed. The unions also were unwilling and unable to bring any real pressure to bear on their employers. The General and Local Bodies

(1) See Ch. 2, graphs p.27

(2) See Appendix, p. 174.

(3) The lime-workers at the Milburn & Price Cement Co., Kakanui, for example, belonged to the Dunedin branch of the union.

Labourers' Union, for example, was frequently moved to write to the Oamaru Borough Council complaining of poor conditions or unjust dismissals (4). However, this was as far as the union was willing to go. In the atmosphere of rising unemployment the unions were unwilling to countenance a strike - if in fact they ever were. As in most centres, trade union organisers suffered from the apathy of most members and workers. Another major problem for trade union strength was its lack of unity. Various unions in Oamaru had virtually no contact with each other in the 1930s. They seemed unaware of each other's aims and attitudes and uninterested in the idea of working together. This lack of unity was not only confined to Oamaru, it was a nationwide problem as the many calls for unity and the proposals for 'One Big Union' reveal.

When the depression reached Oamaru, it was the building trade which suffered the initial impact. Carpenters were among those first laid off and since there was no major construction work in Oamaru until after 1936; they remained in that position. The available statistics probably understate the degree of unemployment in the trade since many remained on the union books in the hope that work should become available (5). Most, however, actually

(4) OBC Minute Book, 17 July 1930, 23 July 1936.

(5) See Appendix, p.174.

spent at least part of the depression years labouring on relief projects. The president of the Oamaru branch, A. Napier, for instance, worked at the Waitaki hydro and also on Oamaru relief projects. Stone-masons, painters and others in trades related to building, were also hit early by the onset of the depression (6). Indeed in Oamaru at least one-quarter of the unemployed were qualified tradesmen. Relief Depot officials noted this trend when presenting their annual report in 1933 (7).

For those who were able to retain their jobs, the depression years were, in some cases, only slightly easier than for the unemployed. The lot of freezing-workers reveals this. Conditions were hard, pay was low and there were always many more willing replacements, at the gate. A typical day at the works began at 7 a.m. This was the official starting time so for those who came from such places as Enfield (eight miles away) or Duntroon (30 miles away), usually by bicycle, it meant rising much earlier. Once at Pukeuri, work would sometimes begin immediately, sometimes at nine or 10, and sometimes not at all. Daily operations were dependent upon the arrival of stock. Work usually finished about eight or nine each evening. Pay was only for actual hours worked, not for those spent waiting. Men not present when work commenced were immediately replaced. It was commonplace throughout

(6) NOT 22 May 1929.

(7) OM 10 May 1933.

the 1930s for more than double the number of required men to present themselves for work each morning. So all day men would be walking up and down waiting for others to take sick or be injured.

Conditions such as these were scarcely favourable to strong unionism. Nevertheless, in the 1932-1933 season, work at Pukeuri was brought to a halt by a short strike by slaughtermen. The dispute had developed from an attempt to reduce wages by employers. The strike must be seen in the context of New Zealand events. In April 1932, the compulsory clause had been removed from the Arbitration Act. This meant that once conciliation proceedings broke down both parties had to agree to approach the Arbitration Court. If they could not agree to do so then any existing award lapsed after a month. In late 1932 the freezing companies decided to apply a series of wage reductions; these varied in extent from company to company. There were a series of Conciliation Court sittings throughout New Zealand as attempts were made to reach new agreements and discuss conditions (8). The Pukeuri Works was no exception to these wage reductions. The Conciliation Court sat in Oamaru late in September 1932, "to enquire into the terms and conditions of employment in the Pukeuri Freezing Works" (9). The enquiry was adjourned,

(8) NZW Aug 1932; Mar 1933.

(9) OM 29 Sept 1932.

however, when the officials from the local union failed to appear. This breakdown meant that the Waitaki Farmers' Freezing Company was now free to establish a new award, which they did. The precise extent of the wage reduction imposed is not clear but the slaughtermen refused to accept it and a strike ensued. Unfortunately for the strikers, they were easily replaced by the unemployed and the Pukeuri Works were able to open by mid December (10). The company was able to form a new union subject to the new awards and the old union simply ceased to exist (11). To minimise the possibility of future strikes, the freezing companies decided to introduce the concept of 'chain killing'. This meant that instead of one man working as a 'solo' butcher and performing the entire operation, each man had only one particular task to perform on the animal. In the event of a strike, those on the chain would be easier to replace than the more skilled 'solos'. By mid January 1933, there were actually two chains in operation at the Pukeuri Works (12).

Relations at the works, however, were nowhere near as harmonious as newspaper reports implied at the time (13). The men who took over the jobs of the striking unionists

(10) Ibid., 13 Dec 1932.

(11) See List of Registered Unions, Appendix II, p. 174.

(12) ODT, 21 Jan 1933.

(13) OM 13 Dec 1932, ODT 14 Dec 1932. Both these newspapers carried reports of Pukeuri as free from labour troubles and the workers as "working contentedly".

were denounced as 'scabs' by the strikers. Contemporaries speak of fights at dances and socials at Pukeuri between 'scabs' and unionists. However, in the economic conditions of 1932, the strike had never had any hope of success and the unionists were forced to capitulate.

The position of Oamaru's watersiders was perhaps more difficult than that of the freezing workers. They were in many cases scarcely better off than the unemployed. The number of jobless men around meant that there were always far more men than were needed to work the ships so the amount each man managed to earn was reduced. The local union had little power and even the choice of men to work the boats was in the hands of the agents of the various shipping companies. The local Unemployment Committee was moved in 1932 to ask the local agents to give preference to married men with families when engaging labour to work the boats (14). Although the union registered protests against various government actions - such as the alterations to the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act, their protests were largely ineffective (15). They, like other New Zealand unions had no power and no bargaining position. Although affiliated to the national

(14) OM 20 June 1932.

(15) NOT 30 Sept 1931.

union of watersiders, local wharfies received little help from the executive body. Indeed, apart from a visit by the national secretary, James Roberts in 1933, there was very little contact between the two (16). Most Oamaru watersiders had to seek help from the local Unemployment Committee. On production of a certificate from the shipping agents stating the number of hours worked, they were given relief work to bring their wages level with that of relief workers (17).

"When their interests were attacked in 1931 they [the trade unions] passed resolutions" (18). Sutch's comment about the general New Zealand situation is also indicative of the trade union activity in Oamaru during the 1930s. They lacked the strength and organisation to countenance a major strike and the attempt by the freezing workers in late 1932, showed how ineffective a strike could be. The Oamaru unions also continued to pass resolutions as they had always done, when they felt their interests to be threatened. The Waterside Workers' Union protested against changes in the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act (19) and the Public Servants and the Industrial Unions of North Otago combined to protest against wage cuts and the introduction of relief camps in 1932 (20). These resolutions

(16) OM 5 July 1933.

(17) Ibid., 15 Aug 1932.

(18) Sutch, W.B. The Quest For Security In New Zealand 1840-1966 p.132.

(19) NOT 30 Sept 1931.

(20) OM 20 April 1932.

were certainly ineffective but there was little alternative. Always there was the spectre of the unemployed to remind unionists just how perilous their own position really was.

For the woollen and flour mill unions, little changed during the depression. The woollen mill girls remained a despised section of the community. Despite a confidently expressed hope in 1930 that the Oamaru woollen mills union would prove strong and effective, nothing more was heard from them (21). Although the number employed at the woollen mills declined (22) from 1929 to 1931, after that year it rose again rapidly. An interesting feature of the woollen mills employment figures is the high proportion of women, and this became especially more marked in the 1930s because of the much lower wages the women received. In 1930, the company employed 69 males and 88 females. By 1935 this proportion had changed to 70 males and 104 females (23).

The local flour mill workers were never a united group. Some belonged to the New Zealand Union of Workers and thus

(21) NOT 27 Mar 1930.

(22) McDonald, K.C. Oamaru Woollen Mills p.120.
Staff (excluding managerial and office staff):

1929 - 160	1933 - 174
1930 - 157	1934 - 169
1931 - 149	1935 - 174
1932 - 163	

(23) Ibid., p.127. Average Weekly wage:

<u>1930</u>	<u>1935</u>
Males £4. 6.4	Males £4. 7.11
Females £1.16.6	Females £1.17.11

were organised from outside Oamaru, while only a small number belonged to the local Flour Mills Employees Union. They were also in a rather small industry which made militant action somewhat difficult.

For those without jobs the situation was much worse. Although those in work might sometimes have little money they had at least that sense of pride that goes with being in work while others are unemployed. The jobless had only a sense of hopelessness. There were no openings for them and nothing they could do would change the situation. Every way they turned, especially in the years 1931-1933, things seemed only to become worse. In a town where one man in every 12 people was registered as unemployed, in the worst years, a large number of jobless must have been milling around. The only hope of work for most men lay in the government sponsored relief schemes. Most of the work on which relief workers were engaged was hard, back-breaking and meaningless. Most of the men were employed around the town under Schemes 5 and 13 or on local farms under Scheme 4A. The amount of relief work each man received depended upon the number of his dependents. The scheme, as originally envisaged, offered two days work a week for single men, three for married men with one child, and four for married men with two or more. By April 1931, changes were considered necessary, in the name of economy. The Unemployment Board reduced the maximum days of work to

three and instituted 'stand down week', that is one week in every four there was to be no work for each individual worker. The wages the men received, suffered a similar reduction. Originally the relief pay was to be 14/- a day for married men, by 1931 this was down to 12/6d, and by 1932 it had been reduced further to 10/-. This was the national figure. However, since Oamaru was classed as a 'small town' in the scale of relief payments, its relief workers received proportionately less than those in the cities and larger towns. The difference a town's classification made can be seen from the scale of sustenance payments current in 1935 (24).

The Oamaru local bodies soon ran out of feasible projects and more importantly the means of financing them. Although some projects, such as Marine Parade, work on improving the foreshore and tree-planting, continued throughout the depression, most of the men were engaged in such jobs as chipping weeds or digging and filling in ditches. Single men received hardly any work at all for much of the

(24) AJHR, 1935, H.35, p.17. Sustenance Payments:

	Four Main Urban Areas			Secondary Cities & Towns			Smaller Centres		
	£.	s.	d.	£.	s.	d.	£.	s.	d.
Single Men	0	14	0	0	12	0	0	9	6
Married Men - wife	1	4	0	1	1	0	0	18	0
" " - 1 child	1	8	0	1	5	0	1	2	0
" " - 2 children	1	12	0	1	9	0	1	6	0
" " - 3 "	1	16	0	1	13	0	1	10	0
" " - 4 "	1	18	0	1	15	0	1	12	0
" " - 5 "	2	0	0	1	17	0	1	14	0
" " - 6 "	2	2	0	1	19	0	1	16	0
" " - 7 or more children	2	4	0	2	1	0	1	18	0

depression. The Unemployment Committee was unable to fit them into its framework of allocations. From 1931-1935 single men were practically ignored by those administering relief work as the frequent deputations seeking work show (25). The continuance of 'stand down week' until 1935, meant that men had to make wages which were already less than subsistence stretch over more than a week. The impossibility of this placed added strains on the available forms of relief.

Oamaru was well placed to take advantage of the Government Camp Schemes. There were two major camps nearby. The construction of a hydro-electric station at Kurow was converted into a relief project in about 1932 and from 1933 both single and married men were sent there. After 1934 when the Kurow project was officially complete, the Lindis Pass camp, some 70 miles south of Oamaru became a replacement. There was also in 1932 the Steward Settlement Camp for single men which provided work for about 20 men from Oamaru.

These camps, with the exception of the Steward one, were never popular in the community. Most of Oamaru's relief workers, single or married, protested vigorously against being sent to camps, particularly Kurow (26). However, most times the men had either to accept the order

(25) See Ch. 2 p. 53

(26) This is discussed more fully in Ch. 5.

to go to the camp or face the possibility of being removed from the list of registered unemployed and thus ineligible for all forms of relief.

Even for those who were able to obtain relief work in Oamaru conditions were harsh. The wages which the relief workers received were by no means sufficient to cover even the basic necessities, as local body members often admitted (27). In Oamaru it was the Mayoress' Relief Committee through the Relief Depot which provided some help to the needy. However, not all were prepared to use the Relief Depot - it was a charity which they did not want. For those with children, there was little choice. To keep them properly nourished, and provide shoes for school, parents had to use the depot's facilities. Even for these, however, there was a stigma attached. In part this reluctance to use the depot - or to admit it - was just normal human pride. The attitude of those administering the depot, however, seems to have been somewhat at fault.

The most common criticism levelled at officials at the depot was their alleged condescension. Those who sought relief were frequently regarded by the depot workers as bludgers who were out for all they could get. The unemployed generally felt themselves to be despised and

(27) OM 18 June 1932.

regarded as 'lepers' by Oamaru's respectable citizens (28). The hardest thing for the unemployed to bear was often the contempt - real or imagined - of their fellow citizens. In the early years of the depression the prevailing attitude was that those who had no work, did not want it. Unprecedented unemployment levels made this obviously untrue, but the belief lingered that the unemployed were the architects of their own fate. A dispute among letter writers to the Oamaru Mail, in 1933, reveals that these attitudes were still prevalent. One letter writer, signing himself "Tired of Giving" commented, "if the men were imbued with British grit and determination to be independent and self-supporting the present trouble would diminish" (29). "Honest Opinion" echoed these views and added that there were "far too many wasters in the ranks of the unemployed" (30). Relief workers did not let these comments pass unanswered. Their replies concentrated mainly on the inadequacy of relief work payments and the strenuous nature of the available work. Equally, the relief workers criticised what was called the "keep your place" attitude (31), shown to them by those in authority.

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- (28) Ibid., 14 Mar 1933.
 (29) Ibid., 16 Mar 1933.
 (30) Ibid., 23 Mar 1933.
 (31) Ibid., 14 Mar 1933.

As well as feelings of hopelessness and humiliation, many relief workers considered that they were being used as cheap labour by local bodies. Comments such as that made by the Harbour Board that it would be wise to undertake improvements while labour was cheap, were strongly resented by relief workers (32). Some felt that the worst offender in this sphere was the Oamaru Borough Council. In late 1934, a disagreement erupted between the local Relief Workers' Association and the Borough Council over the use of relief workers for maintenance work. The Association asked that the Council pay award rates for such work (33). The mayor, M.F. Cooney, immediately replied that the Unemployment Board had been informed of the circumstances and that the men were all employed on suitable relief works (34). However, late in December the Borough Council was informed by the board that "cutting grass and trimming lawns was to be discontinued immediately" (35). The Council, therefore, decided to dismiss 40 of the relief workers it had been employing (36). These men were told by the local Unemployment Committee to report to the Lindis Pass Relief Camp, which some refused to do. The local Relief Workers' Association discussed the possibility of men continuing to work for the Council

(32) Ibid., 14 Feb 1933.

(33) OBC Minute Book, 1 Nov 1934, p.432.

(34) OM 2 Nov 1934.

(35) Ibid., 29 Dec 1935.

(36) Ibid.

at relief rates rather than accept the board's ruling. The prevalent view was that the Oamaru Borough Council was saving money at the expense of relief workers. It was alleged that the Borough Council had saved over £3,000 the previous year and yet had done very little to help the unemployed. The Council would probably not use all its funds in 1935 and should therefore not be employing men at relief rates. The only way unemployment was going to be eliminated, they declared, was by doing away with the 'dole' (37). Although the Association protested strongly against the dismissed men being sent to Lindis Pass they achieved little and those ordered to the camp did so.

Not only local bodies were regarded as benefiting from the large numbers of unemployed. Farmers were widely reported as taking advantage of the unemployed and paying low wages or offering 'keep only' for labour. R.K. Gardiner, the Waitaki County Council clerk, propounded this view, when he alleged that the majority of farmers employing relief workers were abusing the provisions of relief schemes. He cited the example of a farmer employing his son to dig potatoes under the scheme (38). To many relief workers, instances such as this reinforced the belief that they were being 'used'.

(37) Ibid., 9 Jan 1935.

(38) Ibid., 17 Dec 1932.

Another scheme which earned the disapproval of Oamaru's relief workers was Scheme 10. This enabled people to make improvements, additions or alterations to homes or buildings with a government subsidy. The unemployed felt that this was a misuse of relief funds. The money was not benefitting those for whom it was collected in taxes (39).

These factors, the general hopelessness of the unemployed, their destitution, the feeling of frustration at government decisions which threatened to keep them always unemployed, and the growing feeling of desperation, are all factors which contributed to the riots in Auckland, Dunedin and Wellington during 1932 (40). The forcing of married and single men out of cities to camps was another important factor in alienating public support in Oamaru as elsewhere. The tensions which produced riots in the main centres were evident also in Oamaru. They did not really surface, however, until nearly 18 months later, in 1933. The riots in early 1932, passed almost unnoticed in Oamaru, it seems. Apart from two brief newspaper editorials about the riots in Auckland and Dunedin, there were no other reports of discussion or action either about the riots, or the government reaction, for example,

(39) Ibid., 18 Aug 1933.

(40) The riots occurred as follows: Dunedin 9 Jan 1932; Auckland 14 May 1932; Wellington 10 May 1932.

the Public Safety Conservation Act (41). The only visible sign of possible trouble in Oamaru was an upsurge in deputations of relief workers to the Unemployment Committee (42). However, by 1933, tensions in Oamaru had reached a much higher pitch. In November, for example, some relief workers announced that unless something was done quickly to relieve the situation they "would not be responsible for the safety of the town" (43).

There are several reasons for this later build up of tension in Oamaru. Although the figures for unemployment in Oamaru were officially shown to be declining, this was not really the case. The Unemployment Committee and the Relief Depot were desperately trying to cope with rising distress. The committee had been forced during 1933, to enforce more stringent conditions before allowing men to seek relief and work was even more scarce. The Unemployment Committee itself, had just been involved in a struggle with the central authority for the control of local relief (44). In addition, there was the complicating factor of the Kurow hydro-electric station and the government's efforts to send local men there. All these tensions absent in Oamaru in 1932, undoubtedly contributed to the build up of protest late in 1933. There were, however,

(41) OM 15 April 1932; NOT 11 Jan 1932.

(42) See Ch. 2, p. 58.

(43) OM 11 Nov 1933.

(44) See Ch. 2, p. 53

no angry marches or ugly confrontations in Oamaru. One explanation for this relative passivity is touched on by W.H. Oliver in Towards A New History? Discussing the question of attitudes towards authority Oliver comments:

The problem of the absence of social resistance is, at bottom, a question about attitudes to authority and this in turn is a question about the appearance of authority (45).

In a relatively small community such as Oamaru, the unemployed could readily identify those in authority. When the unemployed had a grievance they were able to take them directly to those officials responsible. They knew the mayor and the local member of parliament and were always able to confront them. While these personal confrontations often achieved little, both sides benefitted from the exchange. Most relief workers, however reluctantly, came to accept the view that local officials were often themselves the victims of Wellington bureaucracy. They saw their struggle as not so much against local authorities, but against the government.

The campaign against sending married relief workers to camps illustrates this point. Support for relief workers was, of course, often partly based on self-interest.

(45) Oliver, W.H. Towards A New History? p. 21.

Commercial spokesmen objected to the camps primarily because sending men out of Oamaru deprived the town of their spending power. For this reason also, the Unemployment Committee opposed sending men to camps and refused to deregister those who would not go (46). This community support against a government directive that men should enter the camps, helped dissipate tensions amongst the unemployed. Moreover, the riots in the main centres showed how little would be gained by a more aggressive attitude. To some extent the close relationships within the community depressed militancy among the unemployed. Those in authority could easily distinguish and act against any troublemakers. Non-conformists were easily picked out, as in the case of the home brewers in 1933 (47). In these circumstances, most of the unemployed had little choice but to conform.

Although the jobless regarded their position as extremely weak, they were not altogether cowed. In February, 1933 a gang of relief workers employed on the Tokarahi railway line, 20 miles from Oamaru, waged a successful one-day strike (48). On 31 January the weather had been too wet for work so the men had been sent home. When they reported for work the following morning they were informed by the engineer that the previous day was

(46) See Ch. 5, p. 127.

(47) See Ch. 2, p. 49.

(48) OM 1 Feb 1933.

not to be counted for relief pay purposes. The men refused to work and returned to Oamaru. The next day the matter came before the Unemployment Committee in Oamaru which decided to support the men and pay them for the day lost (49).

Another factor which helped to keep tensions from reaching a dangerous situation was the good judgement and leadership of the local Relief Workers' Association. Formed in 1931, the association frequently acted as an intermediary for relief workers and those in authority. The degree to which Oamaru's leading citizens accepted the association is shown by the full report of its monthly meetings in the Oamaru Mail. The association presented a very contradictory appearance. Some of its pronouncements indicate a degree of militancy while others show it to be conservative and mainly interested in preserving harmony in Oamaru society. These separate incidents indicate these contradictions. In November 1933, a very angry deputation of relief workers confronted the local Member of Parliament, J.A. MacPherson; the Mayor, M.F. Cooney; and members of other local bodies. The relief workers, said their spokesman, had almost reached breaking point. The deputation urged MacPherson to take action on their behalf. They reminded

(49) Ibid., 2 Feb 1933.

him that he represented not only the 'big squatters', but also the unemployed. They warned that unless cuts in the relief allocation were restored, they would have to take 'some other form of action' (50). These comments suggest a militancy which is belied by another statement from the Relief Workers' Association arising out of the same meeting. When the question of relief workers with radios not receiving relief was discussed, the executive of the association supported the local Unemployment Committee's view that these men should not be granted relief (51). Similarly the association rebuffed the notion of a national strike of relief workers, when the question of a general strike was mooted by the Unemployed Workers' Movement in 1934 (52). The association, it seems, was prepared to initiate what it saw as 'responsible' protest. It was not prepared, however, to align itself with more aggressive bodies. The conservatism of the association is probably best explained by its composition. Many of the members of the association appear to have been single with perhaps less to lose than the married men and more ready to seek militant solutions. Most of the association's executive, however, were men of some substance and of a more conservative frame of mind.

(50) Ibid., 11 Nov 1933.

(51) Ibid., 13 Nov 1933.

(52) Ibid., 16 Jan 1934.

The secretary, A.F. Stock, for example, owned a carrying business. He had a position in Oamaru society, to maintain and although anxious to further the aims of the unemployed, he was also anxious to maintain equitable relations between the unemployed and the local body groups. The president of the association in 1930, H.H. Ross, was in a similar position. He was a salesman for a local firm, and his successor J. Millin was a plumber. Thus the executive shied away from any direct action and contented itself with deputations to local groups and with helping those in need.

In many ways the association's chief function became that of a relief dispensing agency. Despite all appearances to the contrary, relief in Oamaru did not reach down to all those in need. The Relief Workers' Association was constantly called on to help families in distress and every meeting reported cases of hardship needing immediate assistance. The help the association could provide was limited by the poverty of its members. Consequently, the association made public appeals for money to finance its aid programme (53). This aspect of the association's work makes it clear that the Relief Depot was not able to fulfill all the needs of the community. The association helped those the depot could not, or would not, help. Most of the calls for its assistance came during 'stand down week' or at times when the depot

(53) See, for example, OM 29 Sept, 1934.

was closed. An editorial in the Oamaru Mail in 1932 commented that Oamaru's relief workers were worse off than those elsewhere since they received no help from the Charitable Aid Board during 'stand down week' (54). Certainly the local Charitable Aid Board was offering little in the way of unemployment relief and it seems that those in need were forced to seek help from the Relief Workers' Association. But the association also provided aid at times when the depot was open.

In many cases it was obvious that relief workers were finding it difficult to 'make ends meet' even with charitable help. Also in 1933, the Unemployment Committee was forced by financial considerations to apply more stringent conditions before men could be registered as unemployed. Since a qualification for receiving help from the depot was that a man be registered as unemployed, there were many who had no means of relief. Another factor in the need for more forms of relief was that the allocation of funds Oamaru received, declined in 1933 and thus less money had to help more men.

To assist the growing number of families seeking help after 1933, the association undertook 'bulk-buying' schemes. This began in December 1933, when a scheme for

(54) Ibid., 12 May 1932.

buying bread and then reselling it to the unemployed workers was undertaken (55). The scheme included groceries, coal and firewood (56). By September 1934, the association had dispersed over 80 tons of coal to its members (57). The association bought the coal and, by using its own members to make the deliveries, kept costs down. Similarly, members of the association began a scheme of cutting down trees on local farms, and selling this cheaply in the town for firewood.

The association also took upon itself actions such as attempting to persuade the Borough Council and the Harbour Board to allow unemployed men to work off their rates (58). Unfortunately, for their scheme, both local bodies decided that this could not be permitted. The association also tried on one occasion, to prevent the eviction of some relief workers from their homes (59). However, eviction for non-payment of rent does not seem to have been a very common practice in Oamaru.

The Relief Workers' Association's main purpose was always the protection of relief workers' interests and in pursuit of this it constantly sent deputations to the Borough Council, the Unemployment Committee and sometimes to individual employers. In July 1932, it sent a deputation of single men to the local Member of Parliament

(55) Ibid., 9 Dec 1933.
 (56) Ibid., 29 Sept 1934.
 (57) Ibid.
 (58) Ibid., 8 Aug, 1 Sept 1933.
 (59) Ibid., 23 April 1932.

J.A. MacPherson, to protest against the fact that single men were denied assistance if they refused to go to relief camps. MacPherson and F. Simkin, the labour representative on the Unemployment Committee, explained that there were not the funds available to help all those in need (60). The association was also the motivating force behind the meetings leading to the reconstruction of the Unemployment Committee in 1933 (61). Early in 1935, the association protested against the sending of the men to the Lindis Pass Camp following the Borough Council's decision not to pay award rates (62). They complained that many of those being sent had no funds to buy necessities before going, and married men would be unable to support two homes (63).

These protests achieved little. The local community was always able to defuse any tension by reference to conflict with the national government. The Unemployment Committee showed itself as being on the men's side but hampered by a penny-pinching national government. The Relief Workers' Association had, anyway, a realistic attitude to its deputations. They knew that they had not achieved much in the way of actual improvements, but they "had at least shown the general public that the men were not going to take things lying down" (64). Another factor contrib-

(60) Ibid., 8 July 1932.

(61) See Ch. 2, p. 65.

(62) See above, p. 104.

(63) OM 5 Mar 1935.

(64) Ibid., 9 Dec 1933.

uting to the association's ineffectiveness was its lack of support. The committee frequently sought more members without success. The chairman pointed out that if all unemployed men joined together, then they would be stronger (65). Throughout its life, however, the association was unable to win the support of more than half of the registered unemployed. The relief workers also did not co-operate whole heartedly in the supply scheme and the executive committee constantly urged them to do so as the scheme depended upon their support for its success (66).

There was, however, a brighter side to the associations work. The committee ran a weekly series of euchre tournaments to raise money to help its members. These were always well patronised and were held every Saturday night in a local hall. Their appeal is probably explained by the fact that they were an inexpensive form of entertainment with the possibility of gain involved.

Also in 1932, at the height of the depression, the association's social committee organised a fancy dress and poster ball, with some help from the local business community (67). Proceeds from this also helped the relief projects. These activities give rise to the somewhat

(65) Ibid., 30 July 1935.

(66) Ibid., 21 Dec 1935.

(67) Ibid., 13 July 1932.

incongruous picture of the Relief Workers' Association one week discussing single men's camps and the lack of work, and spending the entire following meeting discussing a fancy dress ball (68). However, the two are not completely incompatible. They were all merely facets of the association's main aim, which was to improve the lot of the unemployed. To do this they employed a variety of means. But they were content to remain within the bounds permitted by Oamaru society. The association accepted that nothing would be achieved by radical means.

This was true of most of Oamaru's wage-earners - employed and unemployed alike. They were not an important part of Oamaru society and the fact that Oamaru was small both facilitated and hampered them. The small size of most industries facilitated relationships between employers and employees, but it also militated against direct action to redress wrongs. The same applied to the unemployed. 'Trouble-makers' had no hope of obscurity in Oamaru. Equally the town's size also meant that unity of feelings were easier to achieve. The community often felt itself to be united against government interference, and the hardships imposed on relief workers were laid at the door of the central government, rather than the local authorities.

(68) Ibid., 8 July, 13 July 1932.

Thus it can be seen that the place of the labour force in the Oamaru Society of the 1930s remained basically the same as it had been in the 1920s. For those who joined the ranks of the unemployed, however, there was considerable difference. This group played a more active part in Oamaru society - at times making a determined effort to alter official policy. Although the unemployed never reached a radical degree of militancy, they did make a far more concerted effort to present and protect their own interests than had been attempted before by the labour force in Oamaru.

CHAPTER FIVEKUROW: HYDRO-ELECTRIC POWER STATION ANDRELIEF CAMP

The residents of North Otago and South Canterbury greeted the suggestion of the establishment of a hydro-electric power station in their area, in the late 1920s, with great enthusiasm. No sooner had the project been mooted, than they banded together to ensure that it went ahead. Leading citizens in both areas began to work for its achievement. At a meeting in September 1926 these devotees of the scheme made it clear that they were pressing for a scheme somewhere in the South Canterbury-North Otago region. This was to off set Christchurch claims for a station on the Waimakariri. They also urged that the project start immediately and be finished by 1930 (1). As the Oamaru Mail pointed out, this was a project of, "national character as distinguished from the local Waimakariri scheme sought to be foisted upon the country by a section of Christchurch people" (2). Eventually, the 'patriotic' citizens of North Otago and South Canterbury won the day, and the Waitaki River was chosen as being the most suitable. This was announced in March 1927, and the works were to be close to the township of

(1) OM 21 Sept 1926.

(2) Ibid.

Kurow (3). The coming of the hydro-scheme seemed to augur well for the surrounding district. Oamaru businessmen saw economic advantage for their town as the closest commercial centre to this project. Moreover, the possibility of cheaper power held the promise that new industries might be attracted to the town.

A very slow beginning was made on the Kurow scheme and nine months after the announcement of the chosen site, a deputation found itself obliged to wait on the Minister of Finance, W. Downie-Stewart and the Attorney General F. Rolleston. The deputation, representing electrical authorities from Canterbury and Otago, as well as local bodies, urged that construction commence immediately and that more money be allocated for it (4). All they received for their trouble, however, was an assurance that the work would be finished on time (5).

Doubts about the value to Oamaru of the hydro-electric scheme surfaced in 1929, when it was discovered that the town's port was not going to benefit from the proximity of the work. From the beginning, the citizens of Oamaru had assumed that construction material for the power station would be shipped directly to the local port. The Public Works Department chose to ship the material either to Timaru or Dunedin and rail it from there. Oamaru's interest

(3) Ibid., 31 Mar 1927.

(4) Ibid., 6 Jan 1928.

(5) Ibid.

groups were quick to protest. The Chamber of Commerce, the Harbour Board and the Waterside Workers' Union demanded that the government reconsider its decision (6). The government, however, claimed that since few ships came directly to Oamaru it was more economic and quicker to rail the material from Dunedin or Timaru (7).

The decision continued to rankle with Oamaru business interests who had expected to profit from their proximity to Kurow. Oamaru, nevertheless, hoped that there would be a spin-off from the project in other areas. The unemployed hoped to find work and business and commercial interests expected to benefit from servicing the growing community at Kurow. Throughout the depression the hydro-scheme acted as a magnet attracting men from many parts of New Zealand. The Oamaru Mail commented that on one Saturday in June 1928, some 40 men besieged the engineer's Oamaru office seeking work (8). By mid 1930 there were almost 1,000 men working at Kurow (9). However, the Public Works Department camp could not expect to remain untouched by the events of the depression. It too began in 1931, to suffer from government economies. The first cut-backs came in September 1931, when 100 men were dismissed (10). Dismissals continued throughout 1932 with more men being dis-

(6) Ibid., 24 Jan, 4 Feb 1929.

(7) Ibid.

(8) Ibid., 25 June 1928.

(9) Ibid., 15 July 1930.

(10) NZW 23 Sept 1931.

missed in April and June. By April 1932, 300 men had been dismissed from the site according to the New Zealand Worker (11). Those dismissed received notice of their redundancy through a slip of paper in their weekly pay packet (12), bearing the legend:

Public Works Department,
Waitaki Hydro.

Mr,

Owing to retrenchment your services are no longer required on these Works as from

.....
(Overseer)

The dismissals at Kurow increased the anxiety of Oamaru's unemployed. Would the unwanted workers set up camp near Oamaru and hence become competitors for work? Their fears were fed by rumours in 1932, that work on the hydro plant was to cease. Alarmed by this prospect the Unemployment Committee protested to the government. Its fears were partly allayed late in June 1932, by the Minister of Public Works, J.G.Coates who stated that, "it was hoped to carry on the work in much the same fashion as at present" (13).

(11) Ibid., 13 April, 15 June 1932.

(12) This is taken from an actual redundancy slip which unfortunately could not be reproduced.

(13) OM 27 June 1932.

By the middle of June 1932, the camp at Kurow had changed character. It was no longer a Public Works Camp but had become a relief camp and was being used as such by the government in its battle against unemployment. The majority of men on the site were dismissed and then re-hired at relief rates of pay. The change took place gradually, but by mid June 1932, the New Zealand Worker reported that the "work was being done at relief rates" (14).

Living and working conditions at Kurow, always harsh, deteriorated even further once it became a relief camp. A report by a representative of the New Zealand Workers' Union in 1929, bluntly described sanitation at the camp as "pretty crook" (15). In common with most other relief camps, the food the men received and for which they paid as much as 18/- a week, was poor. The shortage of vegetables was a constant source of complaint. The accommodation was basic. Although at some stages up to 80 per cent of the men working there were married, the majority of quarters consisting of makeshift tents, were for single men only. The few married quarters available were taken by the first men hired on the project. In winter months the tents afforded little protection against the elements. One of the commonest complaints was lack of adequate clothing. As Graham comments in his study of relief camps:

(14) NZW 15 June 1932.

(15) Ibid., 9 Jan 1929.

Most men who went into the camps were faced with the problem of being unable to equip themselves properly for the rigours of country work. (16)

This statement is equally true of the Kurow camp. On relief pay, most men had very little left with which to buy extra clothing and there were many who had not come prepared for the intensely cold winter weather.

Added to the problems caused by the poor conditions, was the dangerous nature of the work. Accidents were common and at least three men were killed during the construction of the dam. The New Zealand Worker alleged that the steady stream of injuries was a result of inadequate attention to safety conditions by the Public Works Department. One of the worst hazards was the Waitaki River itself. Cold and swift moving, it offered little chance of survival to anyone who should happen to fall in. In addition, the work on which the men were involved had other dangers. In 1933, for example, a fall of earth at the dam site killed two men (17). There were other reports of injuries to men using gelignite to blast away rocks when forming the dam. The New Zealand Workers' Union alleged that accidents often occurred because of carelessness by inexperienced workers and that adequate safety measures were not observed when dynamiting. It was "common practice for men

(16) Graham, C.J. Relief Camps in the Depression 1931-1935
Long Essay, OU 1976, p. 30.

(17) NZW 16 Aug 1933.

to pick up plugs of gelignite in various forms after shots have been fired" (18). The union was frequently involved in seeking compensation for workers injured on the site, and many of these claims were successful (19).

The harsh conditions and the high injury rate, combined to harden public opinion in Oamaru against the camp at Kurow. It had never provided as much extra revenue for Oamaru as had been hoped, and the conversion to a relief camp meant even less money as the men would have less to spend. Moreover, the camp had in fact become a drain on Oamaru's resources. The dismissals at Kurow in 1931 and 1932, had added extra men to Oamaru's relief burden. The Unemployment Board acknowledged the problem which the construction site posed for Oamaru and promised to give "favourable treatment in the matter of unemployment allocations" (20). The Waitaki Hospital Board anticipated gain through extra allowances to help it cope with the relief cases generated by Kurow (21). Besides the additional problems which the relief camps created, there were also many in Oamaru, as elsewhere in New Zealand, who did not approve of the policy of sending single men to camps. In Oamaru single men had little choice. Those who were ordered to the camp at Kurow either went or remained in the town, bereft of all aid. The Unemployment Committee had little work it could offer single men in the town. Despite this grim prospect, there

(18) Ibid., 23 Aug 1933.

(19) Ibid., 11 May 1932.

(20) OM 23 June 1931.

(21) Ibid.

were still many single men who remained in Oamaru rather than work at the camp.

Disenchantment with the hydro-scheme became almost universal in Oamaru in 1933. In that year the government policy of sending married men to relief camps aroused a storm of protest throughout the country. The major criticism of this policy was that it was disruptive of home life. The other major objection to the scheme was financial, and it was this which held the most sway in Oamaru. Most reasoned that no man could possibly support his family in one establishment and himself in another on relief camp pay. A letter from a married man at Kurow illustrates how absurd any expectation that they could support two establishments was:

The minimum that my own maintenance up there will absorb is £1. 2s. 4d per week - made up thus:

Light	-	1/-
Medical fee	-	1/4d
Cookhouse	-	18/-

Then to ensure that my dependents are housed and fed I must find £1.19s. 8d - which totals £3. 2s. Now I have exceeded the maximum that I will be able to earn up there £3 less 3/- tax working six days a week with no spare time. (22)

The letter writer was not able to allow for such luxuries as boots or clothes in his weekly budget. To most Oamaruvians, as to most New Zealanders, the decision to establish camps for married men was patently absurd. In the long run nothing would be gained, as the men's families would eventually become

(22) Ibid., 21 Aug 1933.

another drain on relief agencies.

In Oamaru, the local Unemployment Committee strongly supported the protests against sending married men to the 'hydro' camp. This was one of the major factors behind the committee's dispute with the local certifying officer when he insisted that married men report to Kurow (23). It was apparently the policy of the committee not to penalise men for refusing to work at Kurow. The mayor, M.F. Cooney, probably echoed the sentiments of most of Oamaru's citizens when he commented that he "thought it a huge blunder to convert the great hydro works into a relief scheme" (24).

The Oamaru Mail was at first slightly out of step with local opinion, as it felt that married men should be willing to accept work at Kurow. "It would appear", the paper commented, "that unemployed married men are more reluctant than ever before to leave their homes in search of employment" (25). However, the tide of local opinion was against such opinion and the Oamaru Mail conveniently dispensed with these views and adopted a more neutral attitude. Local businessmen objected also to the policy of sending men to Kurow. The removal of men from the town meant a loss of trade for them. Therefore, they too added their voice in protest against the government's policy in 1933 (26).

(23) See Ch. 2, p. 63.

(24) OM 22 Aug 1933.

(25) Ibid., 19 July 1933.

(26) Ibid., 22 Aug 1933.

In the event the Kurow camp was filled mainly by men from outside of North Otago. Only a small percentage of the men who passed through the camp were from Oamaru. The opposition which the scheme aroused nationally, made the government unwilling to fully implement the policy of ordering men to the camp and instead men were apparently 'lured' there by hopes of reasonably high wages. A report in the New Zealand Worker, in August 1933, advised all married men to stay well away from Kurow, where it claimed, "pay was down to coolie level" (27). In some ways, however, the men at Kurow were better off than others. Kurow was not as isolated as some relief camps, in Central Otago for example. The proximity of Oamaru meant that they could get away from the camp more readily.

The men at Kurow, were also well served by the local health services. A Waitaki Hydro Medical Association was established whereby workers from the site and their dependents up to 16 years of age could receive treatment from the Waitaki Hospital Board. The men paid a fee, usually of about 1/4d a week to the Medical Association which paid the Waitaki Hospital Board about 40 percent of all costs. There were constant wrangles between the Hospital Board and the Medical Association as they tried to work out an equitable solution and the amount paid was renegotiated regularly (28). In all maternity cases the Hospital Board demanded half fees. One

(27) NZW 23 Aug 1933.

(28) Waitaki Hospital Board Minute Book, 1929-1936.

of the motivators behind this scheme was a local physician, Dr D.G. McMillan, a man with a warm interest in the poor and the needy. He was later, along with A.H. Nordmeyer, to be deeply involved in formulating the Labour Government's social security legislation. Dr McMillan was also very involved in the Labour movement which had a flourishing branch in Kurow in the early 1930s. He had become a member of the Labour Party in 1923, and was also a member of the Waitaki Labour Representation Committee during his time in Kurow. In 1935, he was to successfully contest the Dunedin West electorate for the Labour Party.

The Kurow camp was described as a "hot-bed of radicalism". Many of the camps were. It is perhaps only to be expected that a group of men thrown together in appalling conditions, would begin to seek ways to improve their lot. The South Canterbury Farmers' Union feared that "such large concentration camps would foster all sorts of trouble - Bolshevism and everything" (29). The camp did have two outward manifestations of radicalism; the growth of unionism and the emergence of strong Labour Party organisation.

The New Zealand Workers' Union, the body embracing nearly all workers at the camp was only able to achieve a limited amount on its members' behalf. Its ineffectiveness

(29) OM 28 October 1929.

is probably best illustrated by an incident in 1929. In April of that year a group of workers asked the local secretary of the union to inspect a cliff face they were working on, which they considered dangerous. The secretary, and a check inspector agreed with the men and told them to cease work until the engineer had been informed. The outcome was instant dismissal for the secretary. Although in vindication of his decision the roof fell in just two days later, fortunately while no-one was about, the union was unable to have him reinstated. The conversion of the scheme into a relief camp also told against the New Zealand Workers' Union. The large number of dismissals in 1931 and 1932, and the ever present threat of future ones probably inhibited men from joining the union. In addition, many would not have had the money available for union fees. Whatever the causes, by July 1932, the Kurow organiser had to report: "unionism on this job has become very dead and Kurow might be abandoned" (30). However, the union struggled on there until 1935, when once again the possibility of disbanding the Kurow union was mooted (31). By then, of course, the work had been officially completed and the number of men at Kurow had been considerably scaled down. Because of conditions at the time, and restrictions against it speaking to the men while they were at work, the New Zealand Workers' Union was never able to achieve very much for the men at

(30) NZW 20 July 1932.

(31) Ibid., 15 May 1935.

Kurow. Instead, its major work seems to have been in helping injured workers receive adequate compensation.

The other manifestation of 'radicalism' in Kurow, the Labour Party, had much more life and vigour. By 1935 the Waitaki Labour Party was holding its sixth annual meeting. In part, its establishment at Kurow was aided by the presence of two well-known local men: Dr D. McMillan and Reverend A.H. Nordmeyer, the minister at the Kurow Presbyterian church. Both men were to seek election for the Labour Party in 1935 in areas outside of Kurow; McMillan, as mentioned, in Dunedin West, and Nordmeyer in Oamaru (32). Many of the Oamaru men who worked at Kurow were undoubtedly influenced by the Labour branch there and it is probably no coincidence that the Oamaru branch began to develop after 1933 when men were returning from Kurow.

One industry which benefitted from the Kurow camp was the railways. The number of men at the camp meant an added boast for the New Zealand Railways. In February 1929 a regular train service began at Kurow. The construction work attracted a large number of married men and their families at first and this meant there were a large number of children requiring education. So the railways offered a daily service from the camp to the

(32) See Ch. 6. p. 160.

local school. By 1931 there were some 230 children travelling daily (33). The railways also provided a daily service to Oamaru and the journeys which coincided with pay day were described as, "often riotous excursions" (34). It had also become profitable by 1931 to run a Sunday excursion train from Dunedin to the hydro, and visitors, families and friends of those working there took advantage of this (35).

The hydro-electric power project had changed a great deal by the time it was finished in 1934. From the widely acclaimed project of national benefit in 1926 it had become a universally criticised relief camp in 1933. However, all this was forgotten late in 1934 when the official opening took place. Oamaru entered whole-heartedly into the spirit of the celebrations to mark the official opening. A 'Hydro Celebrations' Committee was set up and it organised an excursion of about 2,000 people to the Waitaki dam early in October 1934 (36). The dam was officially opened on 27 October, 1934 and amid much fanfare and rejoicing "white power", began to flow from the Waitaki.

(33) Dangerfield, J.A. 'Beside the Waitaki River', p. 9.

(34) Ibid., p. 7.

(35) Ibid., p. 8.

(36) OM 5 Oct 1934.

CHAPTER SIXTHE POLITICS OF THE DEPRESSION1929 - 1935

The 1920s had seen many changes in the urban-rural balance. More New Zealanders were choosing to live in towns rather than in the country. One-third of the population was now concentrated in urban centres. Between 1906 and 1936, the total urban population rose by about 61 percent while the rural population rose by 22 percent (1). With this drift away from the country, the smaller towns were becoming more heavily populated and more important, and were entering periods of prosperity. This was the case for Oamaru.

Oamaru appeared, to its more prominent citizens, to have achieved all that it wanted by the late 1920s, and had entered a period of consolidation rather than of progress. As mentioned above (2), the Oamaru Borough Council was dominated by small businessmen all of whom had made their place in society and were anxious mainly to strengthen that position. The Oamaru Borough Council undertook no

(1) Hurricks, P.B. 'Reactions to Urbanisation in New Zealand During the 1920s.' M.A. Thesis, C.U., 1975, p.49.

(2) See Ch. 1, p. 10.

major capital works in the early 1930s and although economic circumstances could have been responsible for this it is important to note that the council had no schemes under consideration, even in 1927, when Oamaru's future still seemed fairly secure and prosperous. Local body politicians were more intent on paying off Oamaru's current debts than in incurring any new ones. This stress on preservation made for little interest in municipal politics from 1929 to 1935. There were few contentious issues and no closely fought elections. Instead, the ratepayers of Oamaru were asked to endorse a group of men who followed a similar line on matters of local government. They all sought to preserve and strengthen the present system and party politics were completely divorced from the local affairs.

Oamaru had three mayors between 1929 and 1935; F. Crawshaw (1929-1931), J. Forrester (1931-1933), and M.F. Cooney (1933-1935). In each case the retiring mayor was succeeded by his deputy, without the need for an election. One consequence of this tidy progression was that there was little, if any, variation in policy during the period. The election of councillors provided little more interest. Although there were usually more contenders than seats, there were no clear issues to disturb the voters. Such divisions as occurred were more concerned with personality

than with policy. The onset of the depression scarcely disturbed the council. Disputes between relief workers and the council were not projected into politics and played no part in the municipal elections. Councillors continued to proclaim a policy of preservation and avoided expensive projects.

There was, however, one local body whose elections did provoke considerable local interest. This was the Waitaki Electric Power Board. The board had been constituted in 1923 and throughout the 1930s suffered greatly from what were described as "teething troubles". Most of the early Power Board's were plagued by the question of profits and Oamaru was no exception. Ratepayers complained that the board was accumulating considerable sums of money at the expense of consumers (3).

Criticism of the board began in 1929. Industrial spokesmen alleged that high electricity prices were driving industry away from Oamaru; in particular, the flour milling industry. Oamaru's electricity charges compared unfavourably with those of Christchurch and Dunedin to the detriment of the local flour milling industry. R.K. Ireland (4) claimed that his company had transferred a portion of their flour output to Christchurch partly because of the high charges (5). These accusations were disputed by the Power

(3) OM 1 Oct 1929.

(4) R.K. Ireland was chairman of Ireland's Flour Mill Co.

(5) OM 3 Oct 1929.

Board which claimed that comparisons with Christchurch and Dunedin were unfair since Oamaru had to pay the government a much higher price for its supply. Also it was claimed that the flour mills received very cheap electricity and that Ireland's had moved part of their output to Christchurch before the change over to electricity (6).

The dispute did not end here. Another miller, R. Milligan (7), claimed that it was costing his company £200 more to mill 500 tons less flour since the change to electricity (8). Private consumers, however, felt that the flour mills were being more than adequately treated by the Power Board, and demanded reductions for householders (9). Regardless of this indication that they had little public support, the industrial leaders banded together in a Power User's Association (10). Most of the town's major firms were represented at the initial meeting which elected R. Milligan as chairman. The declared object of the Association was to take "united action to secure that only reasonable rates be charged for current supplied by the Waitaki Electric Power Board" (11). The Power Board, however, postponed any meeting with the association and one board member commented that "it was not for a self-elected body

(6) Ibid., 5 Oct 1929.

(7) R. Milligan was chairman of Milligan's Eclipse Flour Mill Co. He had been the first chairman of the W.E.P.B. and his company had undertaken the electricity supply during his chairmanship.

(8) OM 5 Oct 1929.

(9) Ibid.

(10) Ibid., 6 Mar 1930

(11) Ibid.

Fig. 5

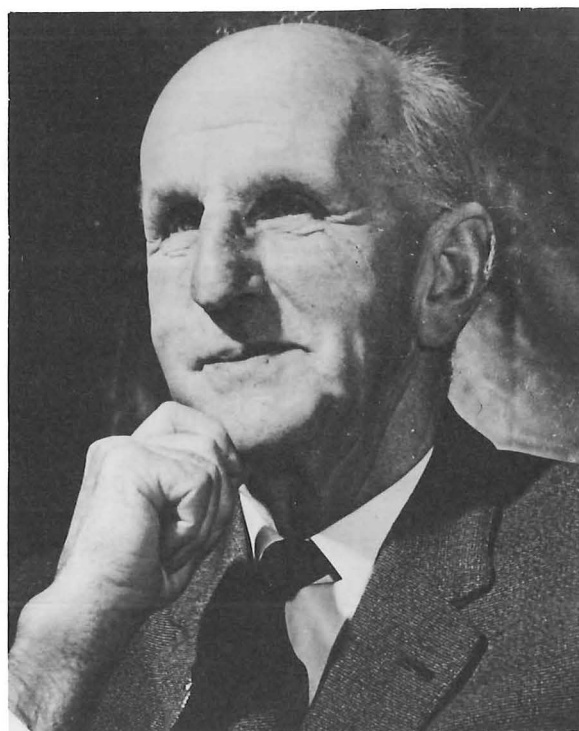
Three Prominent Local Officials



R. MILLIGAN



M.F. COONEY



J.C. KIRKNESS

(M. Smyth, Historical Collection)

of men to come dictating or even suggesting to the board something which it was considering anyway" (12). The board then proceeded to initiate its own range of reduced charges (13). Predictably, these reductions did not satisfy everyone.

By the 1931 Municipal Elections, electricity charges were once more to the fore. The controversy, by this time, had developed more into a battle of personalities between the chairman of the Power Board, J. Forrester, and the former chairman who now represented the group advocating reduced charges, R. Milligan. The board trenchantly attacked Milligan in a letter to the Oamaru Mail for which it was sharply rebuked by the editor, F. Jones. He pointed out that the board members should expect public criticism of their actions and should be able to accept it without retaliating. "The people have a right to civility and decorum in the transaction of local affairs without any gratifying of personal grudges". (14) The 1931 election was fought chiefly on the question of charges. Personal conflict was by now, however, inextricably inter-woven with this. Milligan stood as part of a group representing economy and lower charges and he was elected with the greatest percentage of votes. The Power

(12) Ibid., 25 Mar 1930.

(13) Ibid.

(14) Ibid., 18,21 April 1931.

Board controversies now became a feature of board meetings rather than through the correspondence columns. Milligan and Forrester continued to disagree about prices and the need for economy. They were still at loggerheads after the 1933 local body elections when Milligan became chairman of the board and even by 1935 the Power Board elections were of far more interest than those of the Borough Council.

Apart from the politics of the Power Board Oamaru's municipal politics were characterised mainly by quiet stability. The same stability was not to be found in national politics, where voters were confronted with three-party politics. After the 1928 election the United Party was only able to hold power with the support of the Labour Party. With the formation of a Coalition in 1931 Labour became the official opposition. The apparent failure of governments to deal with the depression led some to question the validity or usefulness of party politics. It was in this atmosphere that the New Zealand Legion took root in 1933. The activity on the national scene was similarly a part of Oamaru's political character, in the 1920s and 1930s.

Throughout the 1920s Oamaru elections were fought between E.P. Lee (Reform) and J.A. MacPherson (Liberal/United). E.P. Lee was born at Tiegnmouth, England in 1862 and in 1885 he was admitted as a solicitor. He came to New Zealand in 1886 and qualified as a barrister and solicitor. He settled in Oamaru where he was a managing-clerk to a firm of lawyers,

Hislop and Creagh, and later practised with A.J. Grave in the firm of Lee, Grave and Grave. Lee was first elected to Parliament for Oamaru in 1911 and he remained undefeated until 1922. He was a member of the W.F. Massey Ministry from 1919-1923 and was Minister of Justice, External Affairs and Industries and Commerce. Defeated by MacPherson in 1922, he regained the seat in 1925, only to be defeated again in 1928 - his last election. Lee was also very interested in local as well as national politics. He had been a member of the Oamaru Borough Council, a founder of the North Otago Jockey Club and a member of the Waitaki High School Board of Governors (15).

J.A. MacPherson also came from Great Britain. He was born in Nairnshire, Scotland, in 1865 and his early experience was in agriculture, commerce and banking. He arrived in New Zealand in 1893 and had a varied career, first working in a commercial house, then he joined the Railways Department, and then he went into partnership in a stock and station business. In 1887 he purchased land at Ngapara and in 1906 the Maerewhenua estate. He retired from farming in 1920. MacPherson was very much involved in local politics, as a member in Oamaru alone, of the

(15) A Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Vol. I, p. 491.

Waitaki County Council (1915-1920), Oamaru Borough Council (1925-1928), Waitaki Electric Power Board and Oamaru Harbour Board, and other local groups such as the Soldier's Aid Association and the North Otago Scottish Society. MacPherson first became properly involved in national politics when he represented the Mount Ida electorate from 1905-1908, after two earlier unsuccessful attempts in Oamaru. He first stood against Lee in Oamaru in 1914 and finally won the seat in 1922, after a by-election. The original result, which also favoured MacPherson, was declared void since both the candidate's names and initials were on the ballot papers. MacPherson, however, was defeated by Lee in 1925, but regained the seat in 1928, and held it until 1935 (16). Never an outspoken representative, he was sometimes referred to as "the silent member", and there are some who claim that the only time he spoke in Parliament was to ask another member to close the window. The parliamentary debates suggest that this was a harsh judgement (17).

In their quest for the Oamaru seat both men were ably supported by the two local newspapers. Lee, as the representative of the Reform Party received the support of the North Otago Times while the Oamaru Mail was a staunch liberal paper. In Oamaru, the presence of the third party, Labour, was not felt until the 1931 election, this was to be the

(16) Who's Who In New Zealand, 3rd ed. pp. 247-248.

(17) See, for example, P.D., 1929 Vol. 221, pp. 597, 764.

first in which Labour fielded a candidate. The Labour Party worked quietly but more or less in obscurity before 1931. The Oamaru Mail published weekly "Labor Notes" in 1925 and 1926. These consisted mainly of extracts from the New Zealand Worker and were published by arrangement with the North Otago Labour Council. By the late 1920s there was a small group of strong Labour supporters but they were not yet confident enough to run a candidate.

Until 1931 then, Oamaru's elections were contested by the same two men, MacPherson and Lee. The electors displayed the same indecisiveness shown by most New Zealanders about the two parties and dispensed their favours equally between them. The 1931 election contained many deviations from this norm and it was to be a complete break with tradition.

Before the 1931 election Lee retired, because of ill-health and a new Reform candidate was required (18). The issue was complicated by G.W. Forbes' announcement, in September 1931, that a Coalition government would be formed. Late in August 1931, J.C. Kirkness (19), was chosen by the local Reform party as its candidate in the forthcoming

(18) E.P. Lee died on Feb 18, 1932.

(19) J.C. Kirkness, a member of a local real estate firm, Fox and Kirkness, was in 1931 a member of the Waitaki Hospital Board, the Oamaru Borough Council and the Secretary of the Men's Advisory Committee attached to the Mayoress' Relief Committee.

election. This decision ran counter to a directive of the party's executive which stipulated that the sitting Reform or United candidate in an electorate would be the Coalition candidate and should not be opposed. This was to avoid vote-splitting. However, local Reform Party members and Kirkness would not accept this construction. Kirkness took his stand on the fact that he had been elected as the Reform candidate by the "largest number of supporters ever gathered" and, "in the face of such solidarity" he had a "duty" to remain in the contest (20). The Oamaru Mail had a different view of Kirkness' duty, he should "graciously retire" and leave the way open for MacPherson (21). The North Otago Times, as a Reform paper, said that MacPherson should be the one to retire (22). Another factor in the campaign which disturbed many conservatives was the emergence of a Labour candidate. The possibility that vote-splitting would let Labour in, worried Coalition supporters. This fear added urgency to the calls for one or other of the candidates to resign. There was an unsuccessful attempt by the United and Reform Party Chairman in Oamaru to reach some sort of compromise (23). In the event, MacPherson and Kirkness faced each other at the polls. Their platforms and campaigns were scarcely distinguishable but each steadfastly professed a moral duty to stand.

(20) NOT 28 Oct 1931.
 (21) OM 13 Nov 1931.
 (22) NOT 14 Nov 1931.
 (23) OM 7 Nov 1931.

Kirkness attempted to capitalise on the vote-splitting potential of the Labour candidate in his campaign: "every vote for Kirkness is a vote for sound government against Socialism" (24). He pointed out that in the 1928 election potential Labour votes went to the United Party. Since there was a Labour candidate this time, about half of United's supporters would be lost. He therefore urged his supporters to stand firmly behind him.

The intrusion of a Labour candidate had scarcely seemed possible until late 1931. It seems clear that without the incentive offered by the spectacle of two conservative candidates fighting each other at the polls, there would have been no Labour candidate in Oamaru. The Labour party had first called for nominations for a representative early in August (25). Despite a subsequent meeting called late in August, no candidate emerged. Indeed, the Oamaru Mail was emboldened to assert that the party could not find anyone to stand and would not be contesting the election (26). These charges were strongly denied by party spokesmen (27). Within days of this allegation, P. Malthus, was announced as Labour's candidate (28). Unlike the other two candidates, Malthus was born in New Zealand at Rangiora in 1879, and had been educated in Timaru. He had farmed in both South

(24) Ibid., 1 Dec. 1931.

(25) Ibid., 11 Aug. 1931.

(26) Ibid., 5 Nov. 1931.

(27) Ibid.

(28) Ibid., 7 Nov. 1931.

Canterbury and Taranaki. A keen athlete he had won a three-mile New Zealand amateur championship at Dunedin, a cross-country championship at Christchurch and a three-mile Australasian championship at Brisbane. Malthus had taken up farming at Hillgrove in 1927 (29). He too, was active in local groups, although on a somewhat different scale from that of the other candidates. He was an organiser for the Canterbury Shearers' Union and had earlier been a lighthouse keeper. He was also a past-president of the Hampden Workers' Educational Association and by 1931 he was president of the Oamaru branch and was active on the Trotter's Creek Domain Board (30).

The 1931 campaign had no important issues. What occupied everyone's mind was the MacPherson/Kirkness wrangle. The correspondence columns of both newspapers were full of letters for and against each candidate. Malthus and W. Paterson, the Labour candidate for Waitaki, frequently pointed out the dangers inherent in a Coalition victory. Whether the electors voted for MacPherson or for Kirkness was immaterial, as a vote for either constituted a "mandate for whatever the Coalition government may think fit to do" (31). This charge was in line with Labour Party campaign advertising through the country which stressed that

(29) Hillgrove is 29 miles from Oamaru.

(30) Who's Who In New Zealand p. 250.

(31) OM 28 Nov 1931.

the Coalition was asking for a "blank cheque" from the electors. For its part, the Oamaru Mail carried the usual anti-Labour advertisements warning people of the dangers of socialism. Under the heading: FANTASIA. SOCIALIST LABOUR AND ITS POLICY, these advertisements exhorted people to do as the British had done and show their disapproval of Labour's tactics (32).

In the event, it was MacPherson who won the three-way contest, although he failed to achieve a plurality of the vote. MacPherson received 41 percent of the vote, while Kirkness received 31 percent, and Malthus, polling very well for a new candidate, received about 28 percent (33). As can be seen from the results of the various polling places, Malthus took most of his votes from MacPherson and the United Party (34). In the five of the six polling places where he gained a majority of the vote MacPherson had taken the majority of votes previously. Malthus also gained most of his votes in areas which would contain a large number of wage-earners, such as, North Oamaru and Pukeuri.

Even after the election results were known, the Kirkness/MacPherson disagreement remained important and in fact it coloured the candidate's victory and defeat speeches. MacPherson, for example, in his victory speech, after thank-

(32) Ibid., 12 Nov 1931.

(33) A.J.H.R., H. 33, 1932. Election Results 1931:
 MacPherson - 3,942 Malthus - 2,688
 Kirkness - 2,946

(34) See Appendix V p. 180.

ing the electors of Oamaru for showing they had the Dominion's interests at heart, could not resist taunting the vanguard candidate. After expressing his sorrow that Kirkness had entered the contest MacPherson commented, "it would have been more sporting for him not to have stood" (35). Kirkness, however, expressed no such regrets. He, instead, criticised the Oamaru Mail for its stand against him by somewhat obliquely thanking the North Otago Times and Otago Daily Times and then commenting that he would leave the press at that (36). It was Malthus alone who remained outside the wrangling. He contented himself merely with thanking everyone and expressing his satisfaction with the "encouraging result" for Labour (37).

Oamaru voters had returned a representative they knew well. The fact that the majority had voted against MacPherson stimulated speculation about the next election and augured well for the newcomer, Labour. However, until then, the situation remained virtually unchanged. There was, however, one brief flurry on the political scene in 1933 - the arrival in Oamaru of the New Zealand Legion.

The New Zealand Legion was primarily a vehicle of conservative protest (38). It developed out of the rising dissatisfaction among conservatives with the policies of

(35) OM 3 Dec 1931.

(36) Ibid.

(37) Ibid.

(38) For a more thorough discussion of this movement see, M.C. Pugh, "The New Zealand Legion and Conservative Protest in the Great Depression." M.A. Thesis, A.U., 1969.

the Coalition Government. A crisis point, for many conservatives, was reached with the decision to raise the exchange rate in 1933. This aroused immediate protests, especially among business interests. It was a move designed to help farmers, but not manufacturers or urban interest and it was from the latter that the protests came.

The avowed aim of the Legion was strictly non-political and this was mainly responsible for its initial momentum. It was also extremely critical of all national policies, as were many disgruntled supporters of both parties, and its calls for moral improvements were well-received. The Legion was led by a well-known Wellington surgeon, R.C. Begg. At a conference in Wellington in 1933, Begg explained the Legion's aims thus: they hoped to

teach the people their responsibility as units in a democratic government, maintain law and order, support the establishment of a truly national party; encourage and stimulate what is best in our public lives. (39)

The Legion was open to all political creeds, even supporters of the Labour Party, provided they did not espouse communism.

(39) Ibid., p. 76

The Legion made its first appearance in Oamaru in April 1933, with a meeting which attracted some 400 people. This was one of the inaugural meetings which R.C. Begg was organising throughout the country to inform people of the Legion's existence and aims. Also present were representatives from Dunedin - H. Paterson and J. Begg and F. Milner, headmaster of Waitaki Boys' High School, gave a brief speech about his role as a delegate to a Wellington meeting in February to launch the Legion. The Legion continued to actively propagandise throughout April and May with meetings in all the outlying areas around Oamaru. Nationally, as well as locally, it had been mainly a secret organisation. However, a decision was taken at the end of May to publicise all future meetings (40). This publicity never took the form of newspaper advertising in Oamaru, however. Instead, the Legion continued to insert monthly records of its activities in the Oamaru Mail and specific meetings were never advertised.

The Legion received the qualified approval of the Oamaru Mail in June through an editorial which stated that, "there is sound logic in much of their aspirations" (41). This comment reveals the Legion's ability to appeal to people of all political colours. Although a conservative body, the Legion's aims still contained much which appealed

(40) OM 31 May 1933.

(41) Ibid., 15 June 1933.

to Liberal groups. By the end of June 1933, the Oamaru Legion had begun forming study circles. These dealt with five specific subjects - central government, local government, economics, unemployment and land. They were obviously part of the Legion's aim of education to improve democracy.

Although the Legion was open to all, its appeal was strictly limited. Most of its members were educated, well placed in society and either uninterested in, or disenchanted with national politics. The Legion never had any real appeal to wage-earners, and received a sharp rebuff from the Oamaru Labour Party. It regarded the movement as "anti-Labour and in no way representative of the workers of the Dominion" (41). The Legion was also attacked by Dr D.G. McMillan (42). The Legion's main appeal in Oamaru was confined to a very narrow circle of the local well-to-do.

From the Legion's inception in Oamaru, F. Milner, was the provisional leader and the motivating force. As the Rector of Waitaki Boys' High School, he was a well-known personality in Oamaru. The school had risen considerably in prestige under his guidance. It was not only his position at the school which contributed to his importance. He was a fluent and talented public speaker and a prominent

(41) Ibid., 8 June 1933.

(42) He published a pamphlet entitled The New Zealand Legion. What Is It? What Are Its Aims? in Oamaru in 1933.

member of Rotary. He frequently travelled overseas to international Rotary meetings which resulted in several public lectures in Oamaru on his experiences. Perhaps his position in Oamaru society is best illustrated by the fact that he was often simply known as "the man". Milner's views were such as made him very well fitted for the Legion. He held very strong views about the dangers of socialism and the benefits to be gained from ties with the "mother country", well before his Legion activities began. He also, naturally, placed stress on the benefits of education to protect New Zealand from the socialist threat. In 1931 he commented on the situation in New South Wales where a Labour government under J.T. Lang had been elected in October 1930 and was frequently accused of wanting to 'repudiate' overseas debts:

There is surely something lacking in the educational system of New South Wales when we find such criminal irresponsibility in high places endorsed by popular vote and when we see the ideals of communism and Soviet sabotage openly flaunted in the face of the public (43).

Thus Milner was just the type of man to whom the Legion would appeal strongly. So too was J.C. Kirkness who became the divisional leader in October 1933. He was the defeated Reform candidate in the 1931 election and frequently these independent conservatives turned to the

(43) OM 16 May 1931.

Legion as a remedy for the country's problems (44).

Equally, many of his attitudes were similar to those expressed by the Legion. He too, was essentially a conservative who believed in the necessity of hard work and moral education to produce decent citizens. His work on the Boys' Employment Committee throughout the depression and his work on many local bodies, is indicative of his attitude (45).

Other local notables, especially local businessmen, were also prominent in the Legion. The government decision to devalue in 1933 seemed to them a retrograde step. It was a final unacceptable decision by a government they had come increasingly to regard as inept and too close to 'socialism'. The move was contrary to business interests and hence the large number of businessmen and industrialists who sought a solution outside the realms of government which they were thoroughly disenchanted with. R.K. Ireland, chairman of the Harbour Board and R. Milligan, chairman of the Power Board, were both members. So too was J.M. Forrester, a former mayor and a member of the Power Board, and Dr D.A. Douglas a member of the High Schools' Board and the Beautifying Society. All of these men typified the Legion's membership; well-educated, middle-class, successful business or professional men.

(44) Pugh, M.C., op cit. Appendix IV p. 205.

(45) See Ch. 3.

The Oamaru Divisional Council of the New Zealand Legion held its first monthly meeting late in October, at which J.C. Kirkness was elected leader. Very little appeared in the newspapers about the Legion from this point, although it did continue to operate in the district "quietly perfecting its organisation and programme" (46).

By August 1934, the Legion appeared, in Oamaru at least, to be dead. This was heralded in the Oamaru Mail by a letter from "Mourning Mick", which announced the Legion's demise:

Some little time ago there was born into this world of trouble and sin an infant of uncertain antecedents and doubtful parentage (47).

The writer went on to say that the Legion's death the previous week was mourned by none. However, this was not the Legion's grand finale since in October 1934, it was reorganised with a new executive; R. Dick a farmer from Weston, on the outskirts of Oamaru, was the new president. The changing fortunes of the Legion in Oamaru parallel those throughout the country. By mid 1934 the Legion's initial momentum had died. Its supporters never contributed to the funds as generously as was expected and its aims were never concrete enough to have attracted long-term support. Later in 1934, it was attempted to reorganise the Legion as a

(46) OM 22 Mar 1934.

(47) Ibid., 14 Aug 1934.

political force, but since its initial appeal had been that it was non-political, this also failed. The re-organised Legion never survived long in Oamaru and, in fact, its presence was never referred to in the papers again.

The Legion had, therefore, only a short-lived and transitory effect on Oamaru's political scene. Its limited following meant that it penetrated the consciousness of only a few. Its life was of interest only to those who belonged, and it was too short-lived to have etched itself in people's memories. Very few in Oamaru today can even remember that it existed.

This disintegration of the New Zealand Legion, left ultra-conservatives without any clear policy, and since outrage with the government's policies was still rife, a new political movement was needed. This was provided by the emergence of the Democrats. The party was begun by W. Goodfellow, the chairman of an Auckland Dairy Company, and its major plank, initially, was the principle of Empire Free Trade (48). Thus, by late 1934, the political stage in Oamaru was being cleared and set for the 1935 election. There were, once again, to be three participators in this contest: the Coalition Party, Labour, and the newcomer, the Democrat Party.

(48) Burdon, R.M. The New Dominion, pp. 178-181.

The election had been deferred from 1934, by the Coalition government, in the hope that by 1935 the gradually improving economy would be sufficient to produce a victory at the polls. As the only opposition to the Coalition government from 1931-1935, the Labour party had been strengthening its position throughout the country. This can be seen in the development and actions of the Oamaru Labour Party. The election result of 1931 gave the party the boost it needed. As J.A. Lee commented after the election:

Oamaru has industrial backing and the first vote for a young candidate is inspiring. The granite city must never go uncontested again. (49)

The local Labour Party agreed. From this point on it became more vocal. The branch took strong stands against government measures such as cuts in the allocation for relief workers (50). As well as making representations to the government on behalf of relief workers, the branch also initiated a conference of local bodies on the subject in 1934. This was intended to find more useful and permanent work for the unemployed (51). The party also promoted lectures on various subjects, such as, Dr D.G. McMillan on "The Privileges of Citizenship" and W. Burrows on "Money". These two people signify two links which

(49) NZW 13 Jan 1932.

(50) OM 2 Mar 1933.

(51) See Ch. 3, p. 88.

were important to the growth of the Oamaru Labour Party, from 1931-1935. These were: the development of the Labour Party at Kurow and the emergence of Douglas Social Credit in the district.

The relationship between the Kurow and Oamaru branches of the Oamaru Labour Party are hard to prove conclusively. However, it appears likely that Oamaru's growth was stimulated by the proximity of the Kurow movement. The party had been more firmly established for longer at Kurow and it included men later to become notable in the Labour Party nationally (52). Undoubtedly, some of the men from Oamaru who returned from Kurow before 1935, were fired with enthusiasm for the party there. One of the strongest influences from Kurow came in the person of D.G. McMillan. He frequently spoke at or attended local meetings and whenever visitors from the national executive of the Labour Party were in Oamaru, he was on hand to greet them or speak on behalf of the Oamaru branch. The reliance which the branch placed on Dr McMillan was evident in 1935. It was to him that the Oamaru Labour Party turned for a representative for the annual conference in Wellington in April (53).

The relationship between the Oamaru Labour Party and the Douglas Social Credit Movement is equally evident, but

(52) See Ch. 5, p. 131.

(53) NZW 20 Mar 1935.

also difficult to prove conclusively. The movement had a number of staunch local adherents who carried on a running battle with all non-believers through the columns of the Oamaru Mail. These exchanges were a major form of publicity for the group in Oamaru. There were definite connections between the two groups. W. Burrows was one of the Douglas Credit movement's staunchest advocates through the columns of the Oamaru Mail. Another firm believer was F. Poole, a local draper. Poole was to become an executive member of the Oamaru Labour Party. The Oamaru branch appears to have benefitted considerably from the local Douglas Credit movement's presence. The closeness of their views about the need for credit creation to stimulate the economy, (although few Labour people were prepared to go as far as the Crediters in this respect) meant that many who favoured the Credit scheme opted for Labour in 1935 as the only feasible alternative.

The party also benefitted from visits to Oamaru and surrounding districts by major figures in the Labour Party leadership. Between 1933 and 1935, the area received a number of visits from H. Holland, M.J. Savage, R. Semple and W. Nash. The stepping up of these visits in 1935 reflects the hierarchy's determination not to allow the Oamaru seat to go uncontested.

As well as all this public activity the branch was also involved in a great deal of grass-roots organising. In 1933 the branch executive commented that although membership figures were "reasonable", considering the depression and the prohibition on civil servants taking part in politics, the branch would need a higher membership total if anything was to be achieved (54). The executive planned therefore, to begin the task of organising the party in outlying districts and form branches wherever possible outside of Oamaru. This organisation was planned for districts such as Pukeuri, Weston, Enfield and Deborah.

The party's growing prominence in Oamaru is demonstrated by its gradual acceptance by the local newspaper. After 1933, its monthly meetings were always reported and the publication of "Labor Notes" once a week was resumed. These now concentrated on exhorting people to join the Labour Party and so ensure a change of government. By 1934, the Oamaru branch had 132 members which was regarded as "encouraging" by local officials (55). This growing acceptance and awareness was in part helped by the type of men who lead the Labour Party in Oamaru. They were of

(54) OM 4 April 1933.

(55) Ibid., 12 Mar 1935.

similar background to the 'respectable' people taking part in other areas of local politics. Not for them even the faintest suggestion of communism or the destruction of the present way of life. H. Grocott, the Oamaru Labour Party president in the early 1930s, was an accountant for a local flour milling firm. T. Jacobs, who was associated with Labour organisations from as early as 1921, was the foreman of a local building firm. These men quieted any fears conservative wage-earners may have had that Labour planned on orgy of destruction and irresponsibility.

The 1935 annual meeting concluded with the hope that by the next meeting in 1936, Oamaru would be represented by a Labour member and New Zealand governed by a Labour government (56). The first move in pursuit of this objective was the nomination of A.H. Nordmeyer as the Labour candidate for the 1935 election. His selection was announced early in 1935 and was greeted with enthusiasm by local party members. The feelings of most of the Oamaru members were expressed by the branch president, H. Grocott, when he commented that it gave him great pleasure that a man of Nordmeyer's calibre should have come forward (57). The party was obviously determined to avoid the confusion caused by its inability to find a candidate until November in 1931. Nordmeyer was well-known in Oamaru. He had been born in Dunedin but educated at Waitaki Boys' High School. After

(56) Ibid.

(57) Ibid., 8 Aug 1935.

completing his training at Knox College in Dunedin, he was called to the Kurow parish in 1925 and he was still attached to this parish in 1935. He was involved with the Labour Party in Kurow and was also a member of the 'No-more War' movement, which was established there in 1930. A close associate of Dr McMillan, it was apparently during their time in Kurow that the two men discussed ideas which later were influential in helping to shape the 1938 Social Security Act (58). Nordmeyer became involved in local politics in 1933 when he successfully stood for the Waitaki Hospital Board. He was also well-known in rugby circles around North Otago, initially as a player and by 1935 as a referee and selector.

The campaign did not begin in Oamaru until October 1935 and then it followed the general pattern of Oamaru's politics by stressing national rather than local issues. The Coalition was once again represented by J.A. MacPherson and he concentrated mainly on a defence of the government's policies and legislation. He also, however, stressed the prosperity of the North Otago district and expressed the view that other parts of New Zealand had been much worse hit by the depression. In his view, the people of North Otago had been "so comfortably situated that they were not qualified

(58) Sir Arnold Nordmeyer confirmed this point in a very brief meeting. Unfortunately, another meeting, at which he could have undoubtedly elucidated this and many other points proved impossible to arrange.

to judge the troubles and distress of other parts of New Zealand" (59). The newspapers, unfortunately, do not record the reaction of his audience to his speech. However, there were probably many, especially among the unemployed, who would not have agreed with him.

Nordmeyer, on the other hand, concentrated on the broader social issues. He stressed the need for the introduction of a forty-hour week, a national health service and national superannuation. He also reminded electors of Labour's promise of increased wages. Three other major planks of the Labour Party platform which he emphasised were; the need for the development of secondary industries, Labour's credit policy and also the question of guaranteed prices for farmers (60). The idea of giving farmers a guaranteed price for their dairy produce would have had undoubted appeal in an area where falling prices for these commodities were regarded as the major economic evil. Undoubtedly, too, by late 1935, Labour's credit policy had moved sufficiently close to that of Douglas Social Credit, for it to have appealed to many in the farming community who espoused this doctrine.

The other candidate in the campaign, Gladstone Hill, representing the Democrat Party, remained a 'dark horse' throughout. Nationally the Democrats were in the main,

(59) ODT 15 Nov 1935.

(60) Ibid.

slow to organise for the election. It was not until July 1935 that they elected a leader. By this time their policy had moved away from the principle of free trade within the British Empire. This policy was no longer given as much importance and the party's founder had quarelled with other members. The party was very disorganised and this was reflected in Oamaru where Hill attracted no notice and little support. There was no mention of any campaign meetings in the local newspaper. The party's lack of organisation and effectiveness was indicated by an Oamaru Mail editorial just before the election advising electors to "ignore" the Democrats, and prevent the possibility of vote-splitting (61).

In the event, Oamaru electors took the paper's advice in this respect and the Democrats received under a thousand votes. However, the Oamaru Mail's other words of wisdom went unheeded. Instead of standing firmly behind the Coalition the voters followed the trend in the rest of New Zealand and elected the Labour candidate, A. Nordmeyer (62).

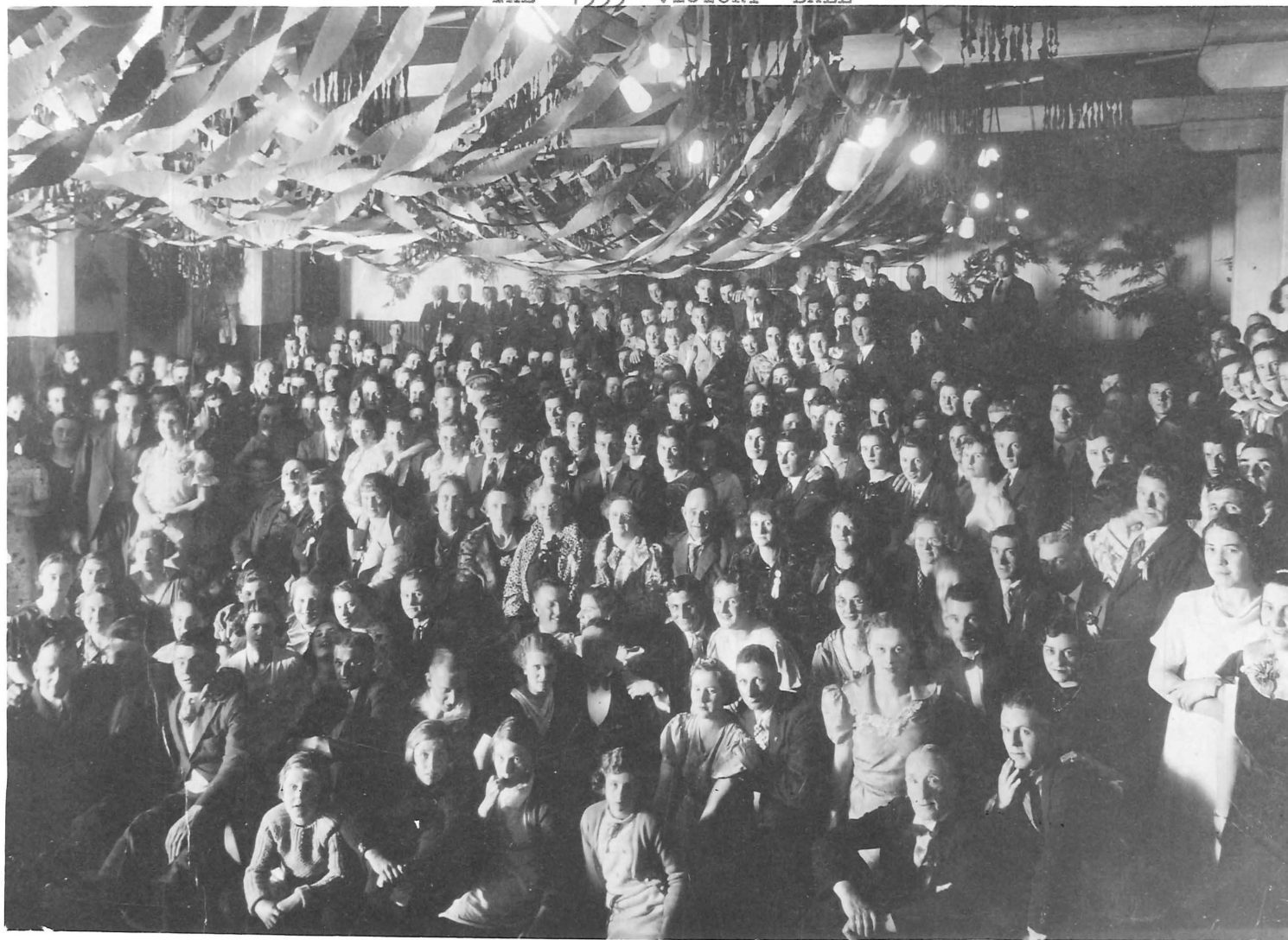
Most of Nordmeyer's support came from within Oamaru itself, where he gained the majority of the votes in all five of the polling places. He increased the vote in all the areas which had voted for the Labour Party in 1931, and whereas Malthus had captured six of the polling places,

(61) OM 23 Nov 1935.

(62) AJHR 1936, H. 33. Election Results: Oamaru:
 Nordmeyer - 5,296
 MacPherson - 4,154
 Hill - 948

Fig. 7

THE 1935 VICTORY BALL



The climax for Labour Party supporters in Oamaru, a jubilant victory ball.

Nordmeyer gained 21 of the 38. However, the majority of the polling places in the country areas remained with MacPherson although even in these areas, the Labour vote increased considerably (63). This increase was probably the result of Labour's two policies of guaranteed prices and credit reform.

Oamaru's electors carried out the promise of change which they had hinted at in 1931. They moved completely away from the traditional candidate and instead sought an alternative in the newcomer, Labour. The events of the depression led many to believe that only a new political force could effect necessary change. For a time, some of the more conservative elements of Oamaru society sought a non-political alternative in the shape of the New Zealand Legion. However, this was to prove inadequate and ephemeral. The two giants of the political scene in the 1920s, the United and Reform Parties, united as the Coalition in 1931, also proved inadequate in the face of the changes needed to cope with the depression.

(63) See Appendix V, for polling place results. pp. 178-180.

CONCLUSION

Whatever the effect the depression had upon the individuals who lived there, the community as a whole seemed little changed by the experience. Most of the community ideals remained intact, even in some cases despite pressure to the contrary. One of these was the belief in the value of making one's way by working the land. Faced with the problem of unemployment, Oamaru's leading citizens advised the jobless to go back to the land. The Boys' Employment Committee tried at every opportunity to place boys in employment on farms. Despite the obvious reluctance of many boys to work on farms and the difficulties of farmers burdened with mortgage payments, the committee persevered in its efforts to find work on farms. The lesson of the depression, that getting 'back to the land' and working hard was no answer to a world-wide slump in prices for primary produce, was lost on the 'local notables'. For them, farming remained the obvious answer to New Zealand's economic difficulties.

The stress on industriousness as a moral principle and a major ingredient of success, never really lost force among Oamaru's civic leaders, and this affected their attitude towards the unemployed. Although Oamaru's leading citizens paid lip service to the idea that the unemployed were not responsible for their own fate, their actions sometimes

belied this. The Unemployment Committee's attitude towards alcohol was a case in point. Insobriety among the unemployed became regarded as a major failing to be sternly dealt with. Unemployment, despite abundant evidence to the contrary, was still regarded as evidence of lack of individual effort. Those who relied on relief work, were in the committee's view, not performing any useful function in the community, and they could not expect the same privileges as more industrious members of the community.

The community's attitude towards thrift also affected attitudes towards the unemployed. The Mayoress' Committee was unwilling to help any family which had not made regular payments of rent. The inability to meet rent demands was often regarded not as a sign of poverty, but as evidence of extravagance.

Community values established by the 1920s coloured attitudes towards the unemployed in Oamaru. The unemployed were by definition failures and since hard work produces success, the unemployed were also idle. Although the high level of unemployment, clearly indicated that there was little work available, Oamaru's attitudes to the unemployed continued in some measure to reflect the view that the unemployed did not want to work.

Parochial loyalty became more firmly entrenched in Oamaru during the depression. Most of the organisations

established to assist the jobless endeavoured to exclude outsiders from their relief projects. As well, the town sought to retain as much control of the distribution of relief as possible. The dispute between the local Unemployment Committee and the Certifying Officer, representing the government, erupted mainly because the committee felt that Oamaru interests were ignored by Wellington directives. In the event, the committee carried the day and won more local control of relief administration.

Predictably also, the depression strengthened the tendency for all sections of the community to seek special treatment for their locality. This applied to local business and industrial interests as well as to the various relief agencies. Local attitudes to the Kurow hydro-electric scheme illustrate this point. All sections of society welcomed the beginning of construction work. It would provide work for the jobless and bring more money to the town. When these expectations were not fulfilled, the community re-assessed its attitude. Many began to fear that huge numbers of unemployed would inundate Oamaru. In 1932, retrenchment at the scheme seemed to reinforce such fears. Local men did not benefit as much as had been hoped, and businessmen profited less than they hoped. Moreover, the conversion of the scheme into a relief work in 1932 meant that even less money was likely to be spent in Oamaru. Consequently, opinion in Oamaru turned against

the scheme. The scheme's popularity then, had waxed and waned as its value to Oamaru varied.

The depression worsened the position of wage-earners in Oamaru. Unionism had not been strong in the town and the onset of the depression crippled most unions. An attempt by the local freezing-workers demonstrated clearly that direct action in times of high unemployment is a dangerous tactic. The lack of any organising body, protecting and representing most unions was felt even more clearly in these years. The lack of cohesion among the unions undoubtedly contributed to their weakening position. Thus wage-earners tended to remain as insignificant in Oamaru society as they had done in the 1920s, perhaps even more so.

Many unionists, however, were to be found in the ranks of the unemployed. It was here that they sought to defend their own interests. Yet the organised unemployed were by no means a radical body. Militancy was not a factor in Oamaru life. In part, the composition of the Relief Workers' Association itself worked against the use of radical action. The predominance on its executive of men with a position and responsibility in Oamaru society, meant that the association worked mainly as a negotiating body between the unemployed and the various relief organisations. Moreover, authority in Oamaru was not faceless. It was represented by men known to the unemployed. The local officials were always easily identified and thereby influenced.

Nevertheless, the unemployed through their own organisation, the Relief Workers' Association, were to some extent successful in winning better conditions on relief projects. More significant, however, was the degree to which the association provided help for those who were receiving little or no help from the other relief organisations. This 'self-help' role became the association's most important, and most of its resources and energies were expended in helping its members cope with depression conditions. Thus, almost for the first time, wage-earners, or more correctly 'former' wage-earners, were engaged in active attempts to influence local policy to protect their own interests.

The depression years brought about change in another area of Oamaru life, that of politics. Throughout the 1920s, the Oamaru voters were content to align themselves with one or other of the two conservative parties. The depression was to change this. In 1931, a Labour Party candidate contested the Oamaru seat for the first time. The sizeable proportion of the vote which he captured, indicated widespread dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the depression. In the years between 1931 and 1935, this dissatisfaction manifested itself in a reaction against politics. There was a movement among those of a conservative bent to seek a solution to the

country's problems outside of the political sphere, through the New Zealand Legion. This organisation attracted many of Oamaru's leading citizens to its banner in 1933 and 1934. The movement's early attractiveness was, however, also part of its downfall and this aberration quickly disappeared from contention.

Discontent with the Coalition's policies moved once more back into the political realm. For the Conservatives, after the collapse of the New Zealand Legion, an alternative appeared in the shape of the Democrat Party. This, however, was to have little impact on Oamaru's politics. Of far more importance in Oamaru, was the development in the 1930s of the Douglas Credit Movement. The alternative economic policies which this movement proffered attracted a great deal of attention in Oamaru, and the links between it and the Labour Party worked to the Labour Party's advantage in 1935. The dissatisfaction with the government, plus the interest stimulated by the Douglas Credit Movement, all contributed to the election of the Labour candidate, A.H. Nordmeyer, in 1935.

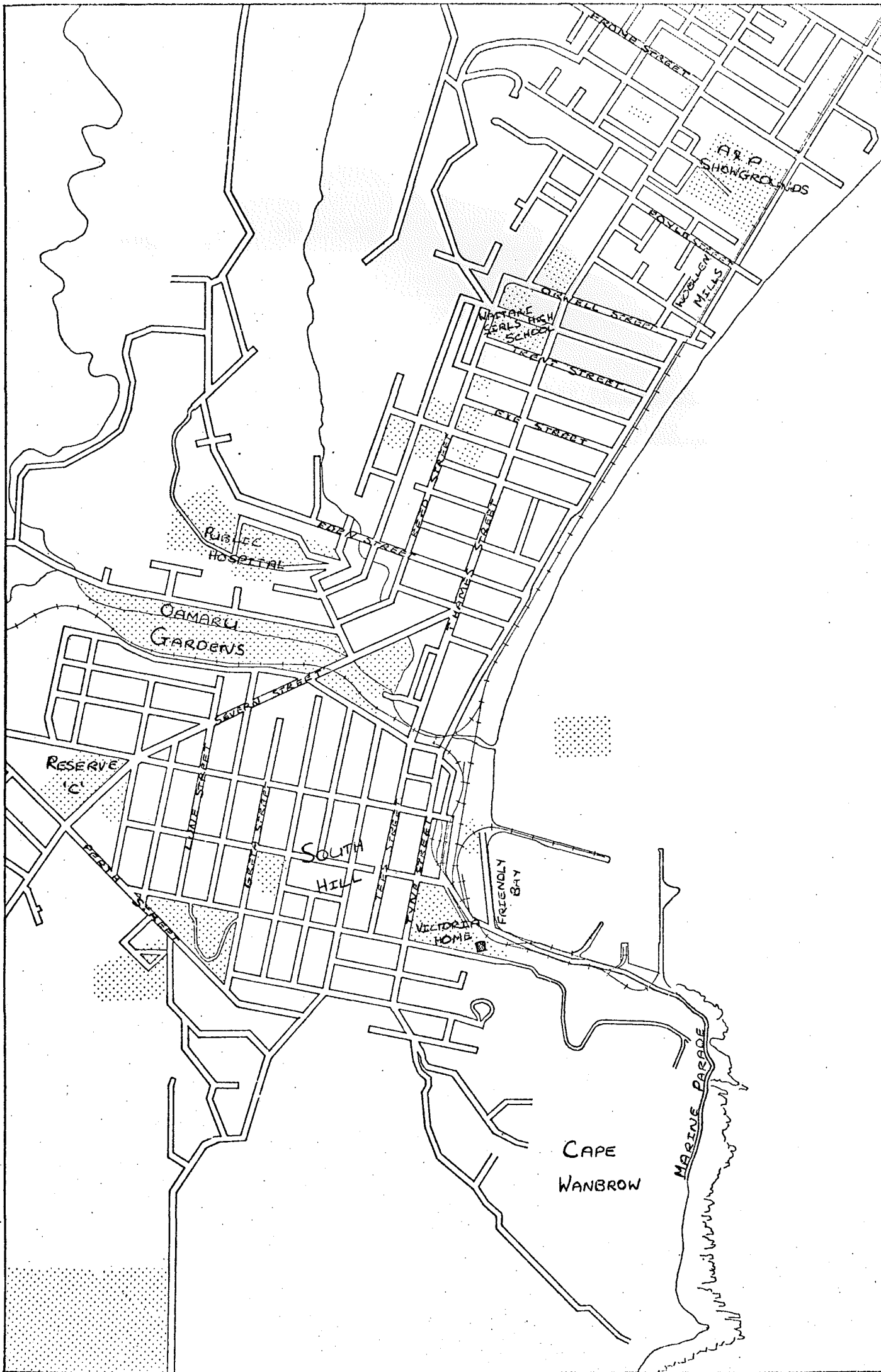
Nevertheless, Nordmeyer, symbolises also another very important influence on Oamaru in the 1930s, that of Presbyterianism. The strong Presbyterian influence is the connecting link in the often contradictory attitudes displayed in the town. The religious influence is obvious in the stress community leaders placed on sobriety, thrift and industriousness. It is also obvious in their humanity towards

the unemployed. Most civic leaders felt themselves duty bound to aid those who were unemployed even though they might at the same time look askance at their idleness. This contradiction between humane principles and the moral principle of industriousness bedevilled civic leaders throughout the depression. Nordmeyer is in many ways a product of these contradictions. Having spent his boyhood and having had his education in the town, he shared Oamaru's background. His role as a Presbyterian minister at Kurow and his work in Oamaru on the Hospital Board, brought him into contact with relief organisations. Through the experience of the depression, Nordmeyer was to emerge as the Labour candidate and become the town's elected representative in 1935.

Thus although Oamaru emerged from the depression with most of its beliefs and attitudes very much intact, it was also these very same attitudes which were to provide the greatest change. The influence of Presbyterianism played a major role in the shaping of the 1935 political scene.

APPENDIX IMAP OF OAMARU

This map shows the 1935 boundaries with some of the important streets and areas marked. The northern boundary occurs at Frome Street.



APPENDIX IIAJHR H. 11, 1926-1936:INDUSTRIAL UNION OF WORKERS(Oamaru Branches)

<u>Name:</u>	<u>Number of Members:</u>				
	<u>1925</u>	<u>1926</u>	<u>1927</u>	<u>1928</u>	<u>1929</u>
Amalgamated Society of Carpenters & Joiners	-	68	69	62	72
Flour Mill Employees	32	32	27	22	31
General & Local Bodies Labourers	40	42	46	26	58
Grocer's Assistants	17	17	16	13	13
Painters	19	21	18	24	25
Waterside Workers	77	77	80	77	77
Woollen Mills Employees	86	116	84	100	110
Pukeuri Freezing Workers	162	146	146	140	129
<hr/>					
	<u>1930</u>	<u>1931-32</u>	<u>1933</u>	<u>1934</u>	<u>1935</u>
Amalgamated Society of Carpenters & Joiners	45	48	55	48	50
Flour Mill Employees	15	22	13	14	18
General & Local Bodies Labourers	30	26	17	14	22
Grocer's Assistants	14	14	12	14	14
Painters	24	20	17	17	18
Waterside Workers	77	77	65	57	55
Woollen Mills Employees	72	29	-	-	-
Pukeuri Freezing Workers	135	152	26	-	-

APPENDIX IIIOM 1925-1935.Unemployment Figures in Oamaru

These are the figures which were used in the graphs on p. 27. The gaps in the early years record the irregularity with which the newspaper noted the unemployment figures.

<u>Year:</u>	<u>Month:</u>					
	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>Mar</u>	<u>April</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>June</u>
1925	-	-	-	-	-	-
1926	-	-	-	-	-	7
1927	-	4	-	4	7	-
1928	-	-	-	-	18	24
1929	-	-	-	-	-	40
1930	-	-	-	-	-	-
1931	75	224	307	404	391	413
1932	437	462	455	451	526	529
1933	599	408	316	292	376	421
1934	324	241	231	229	240	276
1935	344	268	288	303	367	397

	<u>July</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sept</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>
1925	-	-	-	-	6	4
1926	7	-	-	-	-	-
1927	12	-	-	-	6	-
1928	23	20	-	-	-	-
1929	53	32	29	74	-	-
1930	-	-	-	-	-	60
1931	457	482	497	530	517	457
1932	533	593	615	652	594	592
1933	445	429	451	443	416	382
1934	375	415	436	458	453	427
1935	479	494	505	512	-	-

APPENDIX IVAJHR 1930-1936.Government Schemes For The Relief OfThe Unemployed In Oamaru

The major schemes in operation in Oamaru were Schemes 4(a) and 5.

Scheme 4 (a):

This attempted to find work on farms for unemployed men. The scheme provided for those farmers who wanted additional labour on a weekly basis. The men were selected from among the unemployed by the local Unemployment Committee and the Unemployment Board subsidised wages. Board was to be found by the farmer. Oamaru, in the midst of a farming district, was well placed to take advantage of this scheme.

Scheme 5:

Under this scheme the Unemployment Board tried to provide relief work for all unemployed men. The board worked in conjunction with local authorities and while it paid wages the local bodies provided materials, supervision, tools and transport. Work under this scheme began on 9 February 1931. Cabinet decided to suspend the scheme in June 1931, however, because of the adverse reaction throughout the country the idea was dropped and the scheme continued. The work was rationed amongst unemployed men according to their dependents, thus in 1931, the scale was as follows:

- A single man received 2 days work each week.
- A married man with 1 child under 16 received 3 days.
- A married man with 2 or more children received 4 days.

However, as the economic situation worsened, the number of days men worked was reduced, as too was the amount of pay received. Despite these restrictions, the scheme operated in Oamaru right through the depression.

Scheme 13:

This was a local variant of Scheme 5.

Scheme 10:

This scheme was launched early in June 1932. It was an attempt to revitalise the building industry through subsidising labour costs. There were two types of construction

which would enable the builder to receive a subsidy for labour hired.

- a) The erection of dwellings for occupier-owners and repairs or alterations to existing private dwellings.
- b) Erection of, or repairs or alterations to, business premises, commercial buildings, factories or storehouses.

Another condition on the subsidy was that New Zealand materials and products should be used. This scheme was used quite extensively in Oamaru, especially on private dwellings.

APPENDIX V

Results at Polling Places In
National Elections

OAMARU 1928 ELECTION

<u>Polling-places:</u>	<u>Candidates:</u>		
	<u>Lee</u>	<u>MacPherson</u>	<u>Total</u>
Ardgowan	44	86	130
Awamoko	34	40	70
Dunback	50	123	173
Five Forks	61	30	91
Flag Swamp	34	16	50
Glenpark	11	26	37
Goodwood, School	24	5	29
Goodwood, Railway	33	30	63
Hampden	123	105	228
Herbert	123	95	218
Hilderthorpe	32	57	89
Hillgrove	36	32	68
Kakanui North	53	75	128
Kakanui South	30	32	62
Kauru Hill	67	49	116
Kia Ora	40	22	62
Maheno	173	107	280
Merton	11	16	27
Ngapara	46	78	124
Oamaru, Courthouse	619	742	1,361
Oamaru, North Road	237	375	612
Oamaru, Arun Street	512	433	945
Oamaru, Reed Street	386	511	897
Oamaru, Severn Street	201	163	364
Oamaru, Wharfe Street	169	110	279
Palmerston	294	318	612
Papakaio	53	51	104
Peebles	40	30	70
Pleasant Valley	11	18	29
Port Moeraki	21	54	75
Pukeuri	64	104	168
Shag Point	27	89	116
Teaneraki	127	145	272
Totara	115	79	194
Waianakarua	50	17	67
Waikouaiti	192	215	407
Waitaki South	39	28	67
Weston	108	98	206
Windsor	44	79	123
Absent votes, seamen, postal votes and declarations	345	333	678
Totals:	4,679	5,016	9,695

Informal votes	83
Number on roll	10,650

AJHR H. 33a 1929, p. 17.

Results at Polling Places In
National Elections

OAMARU 1931 ELECTION

Polling-places:	Candidates:			
	<u>Kirkness</u>	<u>MacPherson</u>	<u>Malthus</u>	<u>Total</u>
Ardgowan	31	52	47	130
Awamoko	23	36	6	65
Dunback	44	63	53	160
Five Forks	62	37	7	106
Flag Swamp	17	24	4	45
Glenpark	15	26	5	46
Goodwood	31	31	7	69
Hampden	97	60	58	215
Herbert	65	107	39	211
Hilderthorpe	19	46	16	81
Hillgrove	30	11	27	68
Kakanui	48	107	24	179
Kauru Hill	63	35	2	100
Kia Ora	36	27	3	66
Maheno	96	126	50	272
Merton	13	10	1	24
Ngapara	24	69	31	124
Oamaru, Courthouse	395	711	476	1,582
Oamaru, North Road	126	200	217	543
Oamaru, South School	324	445	322	1,091
Oamaru, North School	264	315	336	915
Oamaru, Middle School	150	139	170	459
Palmerston	222	266	156	644
Papakao	49	46	14	109
Peebles	34	26	21	81
Pleasant Valley	4	26	8	38
Port Moeraki	6	17	43	66
Pukeuri	37	48	75	160
Shag Point	23	13	63	99
Teaneraki, Enfield	78	131	38	247
Totaratahi	75	91	37	203
Waianakarua	33	18	10	61
Waikouaiti	107	231	81	419
Waitaki South	24	23	15	62
Weston	73	87	38	198
Windsor	26	58	13	97
Absent voters, seamen, postal votes, and declarations	182	234	175	591
Totals:	2,946	3,992	2,688	9,626

Informal votes	37
Number on roll	10,916

AJHR H. 33a, 1932, p. 16

Results at Polling Places In
National Elections

OAMARU 1935 ELECTION

Polling-places:	Candidates:			
	<u>Hill</u>	<u>MacPherson</u>	<u>Nordmeyer</u>	<u>Total</u>
Ardgowan	6	46	98	150
Awamoko	10	26	37	73
Dunback	10	65	105	180
Five Forks	5	67	35	107
Flag Swamp	3	25	20	48
Glenpark	2	31	13	46
Goodwood	3	44	20	67
Hampden	20	121	117	258
Herbert	25	97	125	247
Hilderthorpe	23	25	66	114
Hillgrove	4	35	64	103
Kakanui North	6	75	39	120
Kakanui South	3	37	29	69
Kauru Hill	9	81	20	110
Kia Ora	7	38	19	64
Maheno	56	123	100	279
Merton	3	16	6	25
Moeraki	7	17	47	71
Ngapara	5	45	94	144
Oamaru, Arun Street	128	440	623	1,191
Oamaru, North Road	42	204	383	629
Oamaru, Reed Street	73	332	574	979
Oamaru, Severn Street	44	132	266	442
Oamaru, Courthouse	178	629	840	1,647
Palmerston	79	326	281	686
Papakaio	11	80	29	120
Peebles	8	36	38	82
Pleasant Valley	2	8	25	35
Pukeuri	9	37	123	169
Shag Point	1	27	53	81
Teaneraki	12	138	106	256
Totara	17	85	89	191
Waianakarua	10	33	24	67
Waikouaiti	39	206	194	439
Waitaki South	5	18	46	69
Weston	26	95	124	245
Windsor	8	63	51	122
Absent, declaration, postal, and seamen's votes	49	251	373	673
Totals:	948	4,154	5,296	10,398

Informal votes	136
Number on roll	11,257

AJHR H. 33a, 1936, p. 17.

APPENDIX VIThe Oamaru Mail and the North Otago Times

From the 1870s until early in the 1930s, Oamaru was able to support two daily newspapers. The North Otago Times, which had started life as the Oamaru Times, began appearing as a daily newspaper from 1 January, 1876. The 'Time's' rival, the Oamaru Mail started life in 1876 as an evening paper. For most of the 1920s and 1930s, the two published almost exactly the same news in the same manner. However, they had one marked difference and this was in the matter of politics. The Oamaru Mail chose to think of itself as a 'liberal' paper while the North Otago Times followed a more conservative course. By the late 1920s it was becoming increasingly obvious that there was no longer any way the town could support two newspapers. The North Otago Times lost business steadily through the late 1920s. This was in part caused by the encroachment of the large daily newspapers into North Otago. Improved transport and roads meant that the Otago Daily Times could now be delivered in North Otago on the day of printing. It came into competition, especially with the North Otago Times for the rural readers. From 1929 onwards the North Otago Times was kept going only through the financial assistance of the Oamaru Mail. Eventually the end of July 1932 saw the paper's last edition, and the Oamaru Mail continued as Oamaru's only daily newspaper.

NOTES ON SOURCES

The major part of material for this thesis came, understandably enough, from newspapers. The fact that there were complete sets of both the Oamaru Mail and the North Otago Times held by the Oamaru Mail Company made this task of research considerably easier. It was originally hoped that since the two papers were in opposition, a balanced picture of Oamaru society would emerge from a comparison of their attitudes and prejudices. Unfortunately, this hope proved short-lived. Since the Oamaru Mail supported the North Otago Times from 1929 until the latter's demise in 1932, there was little divergence of views. In fact the two newspapers show interesting variations in their print at this time. This was because an item would be set up for one newspaper and once used, be transferred wholesale to the other's offices. These newspapers were very useful in providing a basis of information for research, especially in the area of unemployment organisations. But there were some serious disadvantages. Very little mention was made in either newspaper of the role or activities of wage-earning groups. Also too, in some cases it was impossible to check the accuracy of the newspaper reports - this was true for example of the records of the Unemployment Committee meetings. Since the actual records no longer exist the newspaper reports were the main basis of research. However, in those cases where newspaper reports could be checked with Minute Books or other records, a high degree of accuracy is apparent - the Minute Books of the Boys' Employment Committee reveal this. Undoubtedly, the major disadvantage was that the newspapers could choose to ignore anything they did not condone and therefore they did not necessarily present a fully rounded picture of Oamaru society. For this reason the files of other newspapers were also consulted. The Otago Daily Times, for example, provided small snippets of useful back-up material. The files of the New Zealand Worker were also consulted and they provided some information about the Kurow hydro-electric scheme in particular, which was not available in the other papers. Once again the bias of this particular newspaper had to be taken into account. Thus, although the newspapers provided a useful basis for the thesis, always the newspaper's own bias or pre-disposition towards a particular subject had to be kept in mind.

Another major source of information was local records. The Minute Books of the Oamaru Borough Council, in particular, were very useful. The dry factual language in which such Minute Books are written was both an advantage and a disadvantage. The absence of any opinions made for

an easy appraisal of the relevant facts, however, it also meant that an impression was gained of unanimity on all issues. This certainly was not the case. The council's correspondence records would have been of considerable value. Unfortunately inward correspondence for the depression years has not been preserved and outward correspondence gave only tantalising glimpses of what might have been interesting questions. The Waitaki Hospital and Charitable Aid Board Minute Books were also useful, although the lack of any specific mention of the extent of Charitable Aid at the time were a handicap. Two very useful finds added immensely to the thesis. The discovery of the Minute Book of the Boys' Employment Committee among the records of the Oamaru Borough Council meant that organisation could be studied more closely than had been possible from the reports in the Oamaru Mail. The same is true of the Minute Book of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which an Oamaru resident was able to provide.

Local industries were also able to help through their company records. Both the Waitaki Farmers' Freezing Company and the Woollen Mills (now Alliance Textiles Ltd) provided the author with their unpublished company histories. The statistics which these histories provided were useful for assessing the depression's impact.

Two areas of research in which the lack of records was noticeable were trade unions in Oamaru and the Oamaru Labour Party. Most unions in Oamaru had either lost or destroyed any old records they might have had. Although there were records in Dunedin from unions which had links with Oamaru these unfortunately made little reference to their Oamaru counterparts. Early records from the North Otago Trades and Labour Council were also missing. The absence of records in this area was a considerable loss to the thesis and also altered the scope of research. It had originally been intended to concentrate on the unions and wage-earners, but this aim was hindered.

The lack of early records from the Labour Party was also a serious hindrance. Here, it seems, the records were destroyed some years ago by someone trying to 'tidy' things up. The absence of any written records meant that great difficulty was experienced in establishing how and where the Labour Party developed in Oamaru. Thus the history of trade unions and the Labour Party in Oamaru have many gaps and these are compounded by the fact that the Oamaru Mail tended to ignore the activities of this section of the community.

Official publications such as the Census and other statistics were useful in compiling records of Oamaru, as too were the Appendix to the Journals and the Parliamentary Debates.

Depression life in Oamaru was vividly enlivened by discussions with many residents. Although none of this oral evidence is actually quoted in the text, it did provide a good deal of background for the thesis and, especially in the area of Labour Party history, provided some useful stepping-stones to other material. The interviews also gave a clearer picture of feelings and attitudes in Oamaru than could be gleamed from any other areas. The interviews also revealed the inaccuracy of the human memory as a method of research and no use was made of oral evidence unless it could be substantiated. This was often difficult to do.

Secondary sources also played a useful part. The history of Oamaru has been well-documented by the local historian, K.C. McDonald in his two general publications: The History of North Otago, and White Stone Country, as well as in more detailed works. The discussion of the economy of North Otago by T. Hearn and F. Slater was also very useful. J. Frame's novel Owls Do Cry was very helpful in creating background and atmosphere.

Other general works which dealt with the depression nationally also played an important part. It is notable however, that by far the most useful studies on the depression were in the form of unpublished theses such as: 'The Social Effects of the Depression in Auckland' by A. Ashton-Peach, or 'The New Legion ...' by M. Pugh.

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